



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**BRAD
TAYLOR**

**THE DEVIL'S
RANSOM**

A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

"Brad Taylor knows his stuff." —NELSON DeMILLE

ALSO BY BRAD TAYLOR

End of Days
American Traitor
Hunter Killer
Daughter of War
Operator Down
Ring of Fire
Ghosts of War
The Forgotten Soldier
The Insider Threat
No Fortunate Son
Days of Rage
The Polaris Protocol
The Widow's Strike
Enemy of Mine
All Necessary Force
One Rough Man

NOVELLAS

Exit Fee
The Ruins
The Infiltrator
The Target
The Recruit
The Dig
Black Flag
Gut Instinct
The Callsign

The Devil's Ransom

A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

Brad Taylor



WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE DEVIL'S RANSOM. Copyright © 2023 by Brad Taylor. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please email the Special Markets Department at SPsales@harpercollins.com.

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-322198-7

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

*To my editor, David Highfill, who's decided to take a
different road in life. May you have the same wind at
your back that you've always given me.*

We live at a time when every government, every business, every person must focus on the threat of ransomware and take action to mitigate the risk of becoming a victim.

—Jen Easterly, Director, Cybersecurity
and Infrastructure Security Agency

When critical infrastructure is held at risk by foreign hackers operating from a safe haven in an adversary country, that's a national security problem.

—Rob Joyce, NSA Cybersecurity Director

Ransomware remains one of the most disruptive cyber threats to organizations and individuals. This global problem requires a global solution.

—Abigail Bradshaw CSC, Head of the
Australian Cyber Security Centre

THE DEVIL'S RANSOM

CHAPTER 1

August 15, 2021

The Arg presidential palace, Kabul, Afghanistan

Ahmad Khan heard the scurrying of footsteps, a scrum of people storming down the hallway outside of his office. Opening the door, he was startled to see the president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, walking rapidly past with his wife and a clutch of top advisors. Incongruously, the president was wearing plastic sandals and a thin coat.

Ahmad exited the office and scurried to catch up to the group, wondering what was happening. As the president's national security advisor, he had reason to be concerned. Jalalabad had been taken by the Taliban last night, and Mazar-e Sharif—once the bastion of anti-Taliban resistance—had fallen without a fight the day before. Kabul was surrounded, and even as Ghani's top advisors continued to proclaim all was well, Khan knew the barbarians were at the gate.

Others in the city apparently did as well, as the sky above the Arg—the nineteenth-century presidential palace that had been home to the rulers of Afghanistan for generations—radiated a constant thumping of rotor blades from helicopters of all nations, flying about like someone had smacked a beehive with a stick.

Khan caught up to the entourage and snagged the sleeve of

the man at the rear, saying, "What's going on? The president has a meeting in thirty minutes about the security of the main avenues of approach into Kabul."

The man turned, recognized him, and gave Khan a small shake of his head. Another man said, "He'll be there. Something's just come up. We're going to meet the Americans. They're leaving their embassy and relocating to the airport."

Matching the group's pace, Khan said, "Shouldn't I be there as well?" He nodded toward the older advisor who'd given the small shake, saying, "I mean, along with the foreign minister?"

The foreign minister said, "Not necessary. We're just coordinating. You need to prepare for the security meeting. We'll be back in plenty of time."

Khan stopped and they sped away, exiting into the palace gardens. He saw two Mi-17 helicopters land, and the entire group split up, boarding the aircraft. Within seconds, they were gone, the leaves and branches of the garden whipped about as if a small hurricane had come and gone.

He went back to his office, thinking, *Why is the president not dressed more formally? And why would Ghani's wife attend a meeting with the Americans?*

He opened the door to his office and found a man sitting in a chair in front of his desk. A small girl who appeared to be a tween was playing on the floor in front of his feet. It took a split second, but then he recognized the man. A friend Khan had known since childhood, and someone who had proven fearless over twenty years of war.

Only now, for the first time in Khan's life, he saw fear in the man's eyes.

Khan said, "Jahn, what are you doing here? And who's the child?"

Khan knew Jahn's wife had died from cancer a few years ago, and his son was now in the fight himself, a second-generation war.

Jahn said, "My son was killed in Jalalabad last night. This is my sister's child. She asked me to take her to America. She fears for her future."

Taken aback, Khan said, "Jahn, I'm so sorry." They'd both lost friends in the war, but Khan had never lost a relative. He said, "We'll turn this around. His loss won't be in vain. President Ghani has a plan. I'm working on it now."

Jahn stood up, and Khan saw the pressure mounting behind his eyes. He said, "Ghani is gone. He's not coming back. This is done. And my sister asked me to take her daughter to America. This is not going to be a place for her in two days."

Incredulous, Khan said, "I just saw him. He's going to talk to the Americans. He'll be here in thirty minutes for the security discussion."

Jahn looked him in the eye and said, "Ghani is fleeing. The Taliban are inside the city. We have hours, not days. We need to leave, and you have the ability to do so."

"What are you talking about?"

Jahn closed in on him and said, "I know what's happening, even if you government sops don't want to believe it. They're here. They'll be in control by nightfall."

Khan understood like few others the abilities of Jahn and was taken aback by the statement. Ghani's aide had just told him he was returning for a security briefing. How would Jahn know more than the president of Afghanistan?

But he knew how. Jahn had been at the forefront of the war since the twin towers had fallen in America. They'd been unlikely friends all their lives, Khan a little plump, short guy with no ath-

letic skills, and Jahn the raw-boned, towering kid who excelled at everything. Khan never understood what Jahn saw in him, but they'd bonded, with Jahn beating back the bullies in the school and Khan helping him with his homework.

Then 9/11 had happened. After living under Taliban rule, the Americans had shattered the Taliban, and Khan had gone into the government after a stint at Oxford. Jahn had gone to war.

At six feet, he was tall for an Afghan, and he radiated energy. He'd started out in the Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams funded by the CIA, chasing Al Qaida into Pakistan, and then had gravitated to the Commando *Kandaks*, fighting all the way. Eventually, because of his skill, he'd returned to the CIA and become a deep-cover operative, penetrating Taliban operations. He was, to say the least, a most wanted man. And one who had the pulse of what was happening much more than anyone else in the country.

Khan, remembering what he'd just seen, said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's done. Kabul has fallen, but they just don't know it yet. We need to leave, and you have the means to do it. Call a helicopter. Get us out of the country."

"You and the child?"

"Yes. I promised my sister. She won't become some Taliban wife wearing a burka."

Still not wanting to believe, Khan said, "But the Americans have the visa system. We can use that. We're not talking about this going to pieces in hours. I can't just call someone to fly us away."

Jahn stood up, and Khan saw the fear again. He said, "Ghani is gone. You saw the helicopters. This is done. The Americans mean well, but this is going to pieces much faster than they're aware. We need to go. Now."

Khan stuttered, walked in a tight circle, then said, "How can we just fly out? Where will we go? Even if I can get a helicopter?"

"Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The window is closing. We cannot go to the airport. It's absolute chaos. We need to fly from here. If you wait much longer, all the helicopter pilots will have gone without passengers, fleeing the death. They know what's coming."

Khan remained still. Jahn said, "Ahmad, please. If not for yourself, do it for the child. This country is gone, and she will endure a life of pain. They also know my name. They want me worse than they want the country. I have killed many, many of them. They'll skin me alive when they find me. They know you as well. They *might* just put you in jail."

Khan said, "I need to go home. To pack. To get my things. I can't just fly out. I have nothing."

Jahn said, "You will have nothing but your life. If you go home, we will lose the window. And be stuck here."

Khan said, "The Americans . . ."

"They are no help. They can't even get their own people out."

Khan nodded, and went to his phone. He dialed, then began speaking, eventually shouting into the handset. He hung up, turned to Jahn, and said, "A helicopter is on the way. What will we do when we land in Tajikistan?"

"We'll figure that out when we get there. The first step is just getting out."

Khan nodded, thinking. He turned a circle and Jahn said, "What?"

"The Bactrian Treasure. It's here, in the palace."

"What? You want to steal it?"

"Yes. I do. We need something when we land."

“It’s huge. How are we going to get that out of here, under the noses of the guards protecting it?”

“I’ll say I’ve been ordered to move it for its own protection. Take it to a hiding place, just like the last president did with the Soviets.”

“They eviscerated him and hung his ass from a streetlight.”

“That’s my point. If he’d have taken the gold instead of burying it under the central bank, he might have been able to escape his fate.”

The Bactrian Treasure was a trove of over twenty thousand gold artifacts from all over the world. Roman coins, Serbian jewel-encrusted daggers, gold belts from India, it was a horde that delineated the history of the famed Silk Road during the time of Alexander the Great. Found by a Soviet archeologist in 1978 in six royal tombs in northern Afghanistan, the persons buried there remained a mystery, but the treasure was most definitely real. During the time of the Soviet occupation, it had been housed in the Arg. When the Soviets left, and the Taliban came knocking much like they would decades later, the final communist president had ordered the horde hidden in a secret vault under the central bank, with only five persons knowing of its existence.

There it had remained, hidden, during the entire rule of the first Taliban regime. The leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, had tried mightily to find it, to no avail. It had become a sticking point of embarrassment, with many, many men killed trying to recover it.

The conventional wisdom was that the Soviet troops had taken it on their way out the door fleeing Afghanistan, and it was forgotten. In 2003, after the Taliban had fallen, a retired museum worker revealed the truth: it was buried in a secret vault under the

central bank. Now it was displayed in the Arg, just as it had been before.

Jahn said, "Even if they give you access to the treasure, it's too big for you to move. It's not fitting into a single suitcase."

"I'll get them to move it for me. There are special cases built for travel, used when it went on its world tour. It'll fit into three, but I'll take only one with the best pieces. We can leverage it when we land. We'll need some ability to get money. I have a man I know. A Russian. He'll be willing to give us cash for the treasure."

"A Russian? They support the damn Taliban, and make no mistake, when this comes up missing, they're going to hunt it down."

"This isn't like that. He's a computer guy. Made a fortune doing networking in Russia."

Jahn squinted his eyes and said, "What kind of 'networking'?"

"I don't know, and really don't care. He loves collecting things. He was here for a conference last year and asked me to contact him if I came across anything unique. You know, outside of my job."

Jahn grimaced and said, "Yeah, I get it. 'Outside of your job.' Like every other bureaucrat in this damn palace. It's why we're about to lose the country to a bunch of savages. You fucks couldn't keep your hands out of the pig trough."

Khan recoiled and said, "I have never taken a bribe or other graft. I have the means to secure our future. That's all. Those savages will melt the gold down into bars if we leave it."

Jahn stood, took the hand of the girl, and said, "Whatever lets you sleep at night. Just get me to Tajikistan. I want no part of the treasure. That's all you."

CHAPTER 2

Sirajuddin Haqqani studied a single sheet of paper, the double row of names and offenses against the Taliban printed out, some with convenient biometric data left behind by the Americans. Now the “interior minister” of the new Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, he meant to cleanse the country of those who were apostates to Taliban rule. Officially, the Taliban had offered amnesty to any who had opposed their onslaught. Unofficially, it was Haqqani’s job to bring select people to justice. The rank and file of the armed forces and police would be given amnesty, but some would feel his wrath, if he could find them in time.

Currently, the Taliban leadership were taking pictures in the president’s office, vacated hours before, proving they were in charge, but the Americans were evacuating traitors at an incredible rate. If he wanted to catch the men on the list, it had to be swift.

And there was one name that he wanted more than any other. Jahn Azimi.

That single man had done more damage to the Haqqani network than any American platoon of commandos. In fact, he’d led the commandos to his doorstep time and time again, killing his men with impunity. Whether a drone strike or an outright assault, Jahn Azimi was at the heart of death. And Sirajuddin was determined to make him pay. It wasn’t personal. It was Afghanistan.

Two men burst into the room, dragging another man in uni-

form on his knees. The first said, "Jahn was on a helicopter! He took the Bactrian Treasure! This man helped him."

Sirajuddin stood up and said, "What are you talking about?"

The first man cuffed the guard in the head, knocking him to the ground. The second said, "Jahn was here, hours ago. He left with the national security advisor. Both of them took the Bactrian Treasure. This pig actually loaded it onto the helicopter."

The guard began blubbing, saying, "He told me he was protecting it. He told me it was sanctioned. I did what they said. I wasn't trying to harm anything."

Sirajuddin circled his newfound desk and said, "You saw the treasure leaving?"

Fearful for his life, the guard said, "Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by helping. I just did my job."

Sirajuddin said, "Stand up."

He did. Sirajuddin said, "We gave amnesty to all who fought against us. You have nothing to fear."

The man nodded, not believing the words, but hoping.

Sirajuddin pulled a picture from the stack on his desk and said, "Did you see this man today?"

The guard nodded, saying, "He was with the national security advisor. Ahmad Khan. They had us load the Bactrian Treasure into a helicopter. And then they left."

While he knew the Taliban hierarchy would care a great deal about the treasure, Sirajuddin did not. He said, "This man was the one? He was there?"

"Yes, sir. He was there. He flew away."

"Where? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I think Tajikistan. Dushanbe. But I don't know for sure."

One of the men cursed him, then smacked him in the head again, slamming him to the floor.

Sirajuddin held his hand up and said, "Stop. He is not the enemy."

The guard looked at him with dread, saying, "I was just doing my job."

Sirajuddin said, "I know. And now you'll continue your job. You are free to go."

The man looked at the two others, waiting on the axe to fall. When it didn't, he scurried out of the room, running as if he were escaping a fire.

Sirajuddin let him go, then said, "Get me Shakor. Right now."

Four minutes later a man entered. Unlike the others in the room, Shakor was dressed like a Western soldier, with a camouflage uniform that included body armor and an M4 rifle with optics instead of a beat-up AK-47. If one didn't know better, he could have been one of the elite Afghan Commandos trained by the United States Special Forces.

But he wasn't. He was the commander of the Badr 313 Battalion. Named after the Battle of Badr, where the prophet Muhammed led 313 men to victory in the first century, the battalion was the elite of the Taliban. At the forefront of the fighting, using both special operations tactics and suicide missions, it was not an exaggeration to say that the battalion was the reason the Taliban were sitting in the Arg. And if imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, the men of the battalion were outfitted and clothed just like the Western Special Forces they had fought for more than twenty long years.

Removing his helmet and Peltor headset, Shakor said, "The airport is held by the Americans. They're trying to get everyone

out. We can't penetrate without a fight. Do you want to do that? I can take the airfield right now, but I can't in three hours."

"Why?"

"They're flooding in the 82nd Airborne and Marines. I can't fight them. Well, I can, but if I do, I'll lose. Those men are not something to trifle with."

Sirajuddin scoffed and said, "You can't take them out? We've taken out their entire military machine."

Shakor said, "We have, but never in a straight-up fight. We now have the tiger by the tail. You want me to attack them, and I will lose. And you will, too. The Americans are dumb. They have no idea of our culture or society, but if you push them, they *will* win in a fight. Right now they're scared. They're worried. Let them leave."

Sirajuddin waved his hand and said, "That's not my concern. My job is internal security, and we've lost two things I want you to get back."

He explained the stealing of the Bactrian Treasure and then showed him the picture of Jahn, saying, "This man has killed many, many of your soldiers. He flew out with the national security advisor, who took the treasure."

He placed another picture on the desk, saying, "And this is Ahmad Khan, the national security advisor. I want the treasure back, and I want Jahn. You can kill Ahmad Khan to get the treasure back, but Jahn returns here."

Shakor nodded and said, "Where is he?"

"Best guess is Dushanbe. They took a helicopter. We don't have that capability, but we do own all the border crossings by road. You need to leave immediately. Split up into two teams. One is for Jahn, the other is for the treasure. I'm sure by the time you get there it'll be gone. You'll have to hunt it."

Shakor said, "I'm needed here. This place could devolve into a maelstrom of looting in the next thirty-six hours. My men are the only ones who can stop that."

"This is more important. Pick ten of your best men. Only English speakers who have worked or gone to school in the West. No farmers you've trained. You lead them. You go after the treasure, another team goes after Jahn. I want him back, alive. Don't kill him."

"That's an impossible challenge. How am I going to find the treasure or the man a day after it was flown out?"

"They took a helicopter. I'm sure that made a stir in Dushanbe. I'll contact our men there and give you a lead. Jahn will try to hide, but Ahmad will be touting his credentials. It'll be just as big a stir as Ghani flying into Uzbekistan."

"But that asshole is already on a flight to the UAE. If the treasure leads there, you want me to follow to another Muslim country? I can create a team of men who can work in the West, but I can't do the same if it leads to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE. We won't survive."

Sirajuddin turned back to his desk, looked at a map, and said, "He's not going there with the treasure. He has the same problem you do. He's going to sell it, and it won't be to a Muslim. It'll be to someone in Europe."

Shakor nodded, grabbing his helmet. "The one good thing is the entire city is chaos. I can form the teams and leave in the next two hours because of the complete breakdown in security. I can be across the border by tomorrow morning, but I'll need your contacts in Dushanbe, and I'll need some support once I'm there."

Sirajuddin said, "That will not be a problem. You still have your satellite phone?"

“Yes, but I’m not using that. It’s a magnet for American bombs.”

“Not in Dushanbe. Call me once you cross the border. I’ll give you the contact information.”

Shakor nodded again, then picked up the pictures, saying, “I don’t know about this treasure, but I’ll definitely find Jahn. For a little payback.”

CHAPTER 3

I rolled over in my sleeping bag and bumped into Jennifer, now contorted like a circus act within her mummy bag. I raised up on an elbow, seeing her splayed like she'd been thrown out of the back of a pickup truck, her head leaning over the opening of the bag, her hair draped all over the place. I was amazed. *How could someone sleep like that?* She routinely took over any bed we shared, but now she was trying to take over a sleeping bag she was the sole owner of. It was like she wanted to spread out and deprive me of the bed, but she couldn't, because she was in a mummy bag.

I grinned, checked my watch, then felt the tightness in my back from what I was using as a mattress. You can't sleep on the ground for any length of time before it takes a toll. In this case, we'd been living like animals for close to two weeks, but unlike the past, I didn't have to worry about someone shooting at me, so at least I could take off my boots before going to bed. Even so, sleeping on the ground was miserable. Sometimes, like today, it was a good miserable, but miserable, nonetheless.

I studied her for a moment, content. I didn't want to wake her, because the sun was just cresting the horizon, and even though it was August, it was a little crisp here in Tajikistan. And I knew that if I did, I'd be back to helping her dig up pottery shards, her life depended on it, and me just wanting to quit and have a beer.

No, I'd let her sleep until she woke up on her own. I lay back down and then saw the zipper of our tent begin moving. I groaned, because I knew who it was.

The zipper split, and I saw Amena staring at me, her hazel eyes focusing first on my face, then on Jennifer's contorted body. She was our adopted daughter, and Jennifer had decided to bring her on this dig, which I thought was a mistake—not the least of which because she routinely woke us up at the crack of dawn. These artifacts had waited centuries to be found, and yet she seemed to think another hour was a tragedy.

Or she just knew I hated it.

Olive skin, black hair, and eyes with a color that were piercing, at fourteen years old she was turning into quite the beauty, but she still had a little bit of a rebellious streak in her from her time in Syria. Which is to say, she could hold her own with anyone she faced, no matter the age. Including me.

She said, "What on earth is Jennifer doing? Were you guys . . ."

I sat up and hissed, "No! Stop that. She's sleeping. She's in her own bag."

"It looks like you two were wrestling."

Jennifer stirred, rubbed her eyes, and said, "What's up?"

I said, "Nothing. The little devil is here to wake us up."

Amena said, "Only two more days left. We need to get to work."

We were at a place called Ajina Tapa, about a hundred kilometers from Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. Known as the Devil's Hill in Tajik, it was an eighth-century Buddhist monastery and temple that had been on the UNESCO world heritage tentative list since 1999, and was the biggest archeological site in the entire country.

Our company, Grolier Recovery Services, had asked permission to camp out and explore it for a couple of weeks, and the country of Tajikistan had obliged—mainly because they thought we could get them a leg up on the UNESCO decision, but since the designation had been sitting dormant for more than two decades, I seriously doubted it.

That, and because our company really had nothing to do with archeology or UNESCO, but that was a secret I wasn't going to tell anyone in Tajikistan.

GRS was what we called a front company. Ostensibly, we facilitated archeological work around the world, helping real archeologists on their way in areas that were not that conducive to the work. Meaning, we could assist them both with the government in question and the bad man outside the gates. Jennifer had a degree in anthropology, and I had a degree in killing people, which worked out for our little company.

We spent our off days helping universities and other organizations with government permits, doing security assessments, and generally greasing the skids, and it was a good living, but while Jennifer loved these excursions, I thought of them as work. I wanted to hunt, but I understood the reason for this trip. We needed to make sure our cover was solid if anyone came looking.

In the end, using that façade, our real purpose was hunting terrorists in both nonpermissive and permissive environments, cloaking our actions with the company's name. It was ingenious, if I do say so myself, because there were very few places on earth that didn't have some sort of archeological site we could leverage.

Jennifer was my partner in the company, and she truly loved this end of the work. She had developed into a little bit of a killer herself over the years for the other side of our job, even if she

wouldn't admit it. She didn't like looking in the mirror and seeing what came back, but she *was* a killer. At her core, she wanted to explore, digging up pottery shards and pieces of skulls, because that's what made her whole. But I'd seen her on the other end of a barrel, and she was a predator just like I was. I, on the other hand, could fully admit that digging up bones in the middle of nowhere was about as much fun as sticking a fork in my eye.

This excursion was really nothing more than a vacation designed to increase the believability of the company. Called a "cover development" trip, it was paid by the U.S. taxpayer, and solely designed to show that Grolier really did do archeological work. Don't believe me? Just take a look at this work we did in Tajikistan!

We had to execute about two cover development trips for every one where we put somebody's head on a spike just to make sure we could bullshit our way around anyone investigating us—be that a friendly government or a hostile sub-state group—and this was one such trip, only this time Jennifer had brought Amena with us.

For the life of me, I don't know why. We'd brought her on our honeymoon a couple of months ago, and that had turned into an absolute shit show.

Jennifer sat up, her blond hair looking like she'd plugged her finger into a socket, and smiled, saying, "Well, at least two of us enjoy the work."

Amena fully unzipped the tent and scampered inside, saying, "There's room in here for me. Can I stay with you guys at least one night?"

I let her flop on top of me and said, "You have a tent. Why cram three people into one?"

She said, "Nick snores. I mean bad."

I laughed, knowing she was just making excuses. I had three other team members with me on the “dig,” all there simply to solidify their “employment” with the company. We needed to have ironclad backstopping when we did clandestine work on the off chance we were compromised, so I could “prove” they were who they said they were.

Given that, it meant three tents total for the excursion, which left one tent with only a single person. Nicholas Seacrest—callsign Veep—had been chosen as the outlier, 1) because he was the junior team member, but 2) because his girlfriend was actually Amena’s nanny when we were away.

Given that the sun had barely crested the horizon, I was regretting she wasn’t watching Amena right now.

Jennifer tousled her hair and said, “Yeah, maybe you can stay for one night.”

Amena looked at me to see if I agreed, and I smiled. I literally couldn’t tell her no. In truth, Jennifer was the disciplinarian of this relationship, but Amena and I had a little bit of a personal connection that went beyond adoption. Meaning when we’d first met, I’d slaughtered several men to keep her alive. Those actions hadn’t been pretty, but the end result had been. She was now my daughter, not by birth, but by a shared experience.

I heard a scuffling outside the tent, then my second-in-command poked his head in. I rolled my eyes and said, “Come on in, Knuckles. Let’s get everyone inside here.”

Knuckles looked every bit like some wandering Birkenstock-wearing backpacker, complete with shaggy black hair, a T-shirt espousing some ironic saying, and puka beads around his neck. If you looked closely, you’d see that shirt stretched over ropes of muscle, and if you reached his eyes, you’d see that he wasn’t being

ironic. He was wanting you to test him for wearing it. And if you did, you'd be the worse for it.

Knuckles was a Navy SEAL, but I didn't hold that against him, because he was one of the finest operators I had ever served with. He'd just picked the wrong service to start with, his wardrobe notwithstanding.

He chuckled and said, "No, that's okay. Jennifer looks like she's been in a dogfight. Not sure what you guys do in here at night."

Amena laughed, and Knuckles grew serious. "Pike, the sat phone went off in the night. I think you should check it."

I sat up, moving Amena to the side, and, while putting on my boots, said, "What's up?"

He stepped back, letting me exit the tent, then said, "I don't know, but it's Taskforce. They called while we were asleep."

CHAPTER 4

I stumbled out of the tent saying, “Why would the Taskforce call us here? They know we’re doing cover development.”

Knuckles said, “I have no idea, but we don’t get voice mails on that system, and all I saw was the number. It’s George Wolffe. Something’s gone bad.”

I nodded, saying, “What, though? We’re in Tajikistan. What could have gone so wrong that we need to be pulled in?”

He just shook his head.

We worked for a government organization called Project Prometheus, which was the classified code name for our unit. Since we couldn’t say the name out loud, we’d just taken to calling ourselves the Taskforce. Simple. A name that meant nothing. But really meant everything—especially if I was getting a call in Tajikistan on a cover development trip.

I picked up the sat phone, saw the last called number, and looked at Knuckles. He nodded, saying, “I think we’re going to get some high adventure here.”

I shook my head, not wanting to dial, but did so. The phone rang out to a voice mail for a cover organization called Blaisdell Consulting. Which was the headquarters for the Taskforce.

I left a message and hung up. “This had better not be some bullshit that the CIA or SOCOM couldn’t handle.”

Project Prometheus—the Taskforce—was a unique unit de-

signed to solve unique problems. Issues that the traditional intelligence or military architecture couldn't solve. We were only pulled into play when all other options were exhausted, and that was for a reason—namely, that we operated outside the bounds of the U.S. Constitution. We had free rein to stop a threat, but in so doing, we also had free rein to ignore any rights ensconced in the very thing we were protecting. It was something I took very, very seriously, as did the man I'd just called.

When the unit had been formed after 9/11, we'd all cheered about how we were going to take it to the enemy, but some had realized that what we'd created had the potential to go bad. I say "some," but it was really my mentor, the first commander of the Taskforce, Colonel Kurt Hale. He'd been killed by a car bomb in my front yard and I'd proven the risks of the organization when I'd gone off the reservation to avenge him, slaughtering anyone who'd had anything to do with his death. That had caused some consternation within the chain of command, to say the least, but in my heart, I held his views.

Most of the time.

We weren't hired guns. We were problem solvers who could shoot. Give me a problem you couldn't solve, and I would do it. If I had to shoot to get it done, I would, but it had to be for the right reasons.

I saw Knuckles' tent open and my third team member appear, Brett Thorpe. A short fireplug of muscle, he was out of place as an African American here in Tajikistan—but then again, so were we, I suppose. Didn't really matter, because like everyone else, he was ostensibly an employee of GRS. It wasn't like we were trying to pretend we were Tajiks. He was also a prior Force Recon Marine and currently a paramilitary officer with the Special Activities

Center of the CIA, with a little bit of a wicked sense of humor. Which is to say, I wouldn't do a mission without him.

He approached, looked at Knuckles, then at me, saying, "So what's up?"

I said, "Left a message. No idea."

Knuckles said, "What do you think this is about? We're here in the middle of nowhere."

I took a breath and said, "I don't know, but it's not going to be good. Wolffe would never interrupt this trip for something mundane."

He chuckled and said, "Well, if it's something bad here in the barren wildlands, all I've got is my ZEV Tech Glock. I only brought two magazines for someone trying to harm us here. I didn't think about getting into a gunfight. You got more?"

I said, "Not here. I have the same. Two mags. Thank God I demanded the Rock Star bird come with a package."

Surprised, Knuckles said, "You got permission for a loadout in the Rock Star bird for a signature reduction trip? How did you manage that?"

I smiled. "I'm very persuasive when I want to be." I shook my head, stared at the phone, and said, "What the hell is going on?"

This was supposed to be a simple cover development mission, and I was now glad my insistence on the package for the Rock Star bird had been approved.

Then the phone rang.

I answered, saying, "This is Pike."

I heard, "Stand by for Wolffe. We've been trying to get you for hours."

Knuckles gave me a look and I said, "On hold. Wolffe is coming on the line."

I waited, then heard, "Is this Pike?"

I said, "Yes, sir, this is Pike. What's up?"

"Have you been watching the news?"

A little incensed, I said, "No, sir. I'm in Tajikistan. I have no ability to watch the news. Did Kim Kardashian do something I missed?"

"Pike, Afghanistan is lost. The Taliban just took over Kabul. It's done."

It took a second to process. We'd only been here a week, and when I'd left, there were peace discussions going on in Doha, Qatar.

We've lost the country?

I said, "Say again? What do you mean Kabul is lost? You mean it's coming to a close and Kabul is in danger?"

"No. Kabul is lost. It's over. I don't have time to get into it, but Kabul has fallen, and we're doing everything we can to evacuate AMCITS from the county. It's a mess. The 82nd is in right now controlling the Kabul airfield. But that's not why I'm calling."

I said, "Wait, wait, are you saying we've folded up the flag?"

"Yes. But that's not why I'm calling—"

The statement was a body blow to me. I'd spent more than a few years in Afghanistan after 9/11 and his words were like blistering acid. Not that I didn't know it was coming. I knew we were leaving, but that was when the Afghan government had a least a year to succeed against the Taliban. According to our own Task-force intel guys.

I snarled, "We've lost the whole damn country? What about Maser or Jalalabad?"

"Pike, it's done. They're gone. The president fled the country. The Taliban are running amok. Haven't you been watching the news?"

“Sir, I told you, we don’t have news out here in the wild lands. I’m living in a tent talking to you on a sat phone. I have seen nothing on this.”

I couldn’t believe it. *We* were the eight-hundred-pound gorilla. How could those fucks have taken over the entire country? But I knew how, in my heart. Like a lightning strike going from pole to pole, I thought about the Afghan men I’d served with who were now at the hands of savages.

I said, “What about the *Kandaks*? The Commandos? What are we doing for them?”

“The 82nd is evacuating as many as they can, but that’s why I’m calling. We have a special request from the CIA.”

I looked at the sky, then at Knuckles. He squinted his eyes and I said, “What is it?”

“There’s a man who worked both for the CIA counter pursuit teams, then for the Commandos, then went deep cover penetrating Taliban infrastructure. He managed to make it to Tajikistan and he’s on the run.”

I nodded, even as I knew Wolffe couldn’t see it, saying, “Okay, go on.”

“He’s in Dushanbe. He fled with the national security advisor, but they split up. We have intel that the Badr 313 Battalion is hunting him. We want to bring him home. The CIA doesn’t have the assets to do it, but you do. Kerry Bostwick asked for you.”

Kerry was the head of the CIA, and a good man. While I had my issues with the organization, I didn’t with the man running it. He wouldn’t have delegated it to us if he had any ability to extract this asset. But I asked anyway.

“Why isn’t he pulling the guy out? What do I have that he doesn’t? I’m here as a private company. He owns the entire CIA.”

I heard heat from the phone, the distance not diluting the anger. "I can't believe you're even asking that question. I don't *know* why he can't do it. What I know is that the asset is going to be dead in twenty-four hours or less and the CIA asked for our help."

Chagrined, I said, "Sorry, sir. Just trying to get the state of play here. Of course we'll pull him out. Where is he?"

"Dushanbe. That's all I know. Start moving, and I'll give you a lock-on. We have a case officer working it right now. He contacted his CO in Afghanistan, but that guy had already gone home to DC. He passed the contact to us. We have Carly in Dushanbe. She's setting up the meet. It should just be a quick in-and-out."

I said, "Carly? What's she doing here? She speaks Spanish and Portuguese."

"All we could get on short notice. She's in Dushanbe coordinating with the CIA station chief. She's in charge of the meet. All you need to do is get him, take him to the bird, and let him fly. Then you can return to digging up pottery shards."

I said, "No issues. Is the Oversight Council aware, in case I have to go kinetic here?"

The Oversight Council was the body of men and women who oversaw all Taskforce actions. Comprised of thirteen members drawn from both the government and civilian world, they were the ones I'd aggravated in my quest to avenge Kurt Hale, but they still oversaw my operations. Since we were—to say the least—a little illegal, nothing we did happened without their approval, and I wanted to know, if I was forced into lethal action, that I was approved.

Wolffe said, "Yeah, they're all read on. Kerry was pretty forceful, and as a member of the Council his words held weight. This

guy was apparently one of their best operatives, and the president himself approved the mission. The ROE is hostile force.”

That made me smile. Hostile force rules of engagement meant I could kill whomever I wanted. I said, “Hostile force? Seriously? This man is worth upsetting our relationships inside another country?”

George Wolfe said, “According to Kerry, he did more for the military mission than most of the U.S. folks in uniform. We’re getting him to the United States. That’s from the president himself.”

My smile grew larger. I said, “Perfect. Give me the lock-on, and I’ll get him out.”

Wolfe said, “I’m working it now, but Pike, this still needs to be clandestine. We can’t compromise your company or the Task-force.”

I laughed and said, “I can’t promise that, sir, and you know it. I’ll do what I can, but when you grab the tiger by the tail, you still get the tiger.”

“The Oversight Council doesn’t want the tiger. They want a seamless extraction.”

I said, “And Kerry? What’s he want?”

“He wants his man out. Period.”

And I realized why I liked Kerry Bostwick. He cared more about the men than whatever bullshit was going on in Washington, DC.

I said, “Then fuck the Oversight Council. I’ll get his man home, but it may be behind a wrecking ball.”