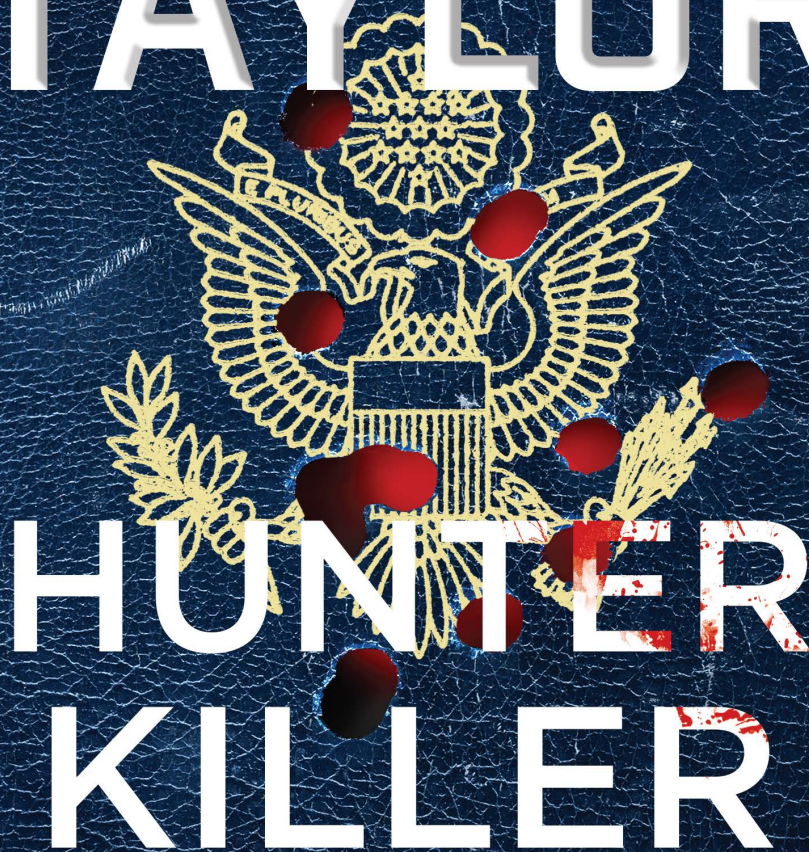


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A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

Brad
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*To my Deputy Commander of Everything,
for keeping the ship sailing through the storm*

There are hunters and there are victims. By your cunning, you will decide whether you're a hunter or a victim.

—*General (Ret.) James Mattis*

HUNTER KILLER

CHAPTER 1

The road in front of me was empty. Just a narrow alley leading to the entryway I intended to penetrate. A fetid, cobblestone lane built centuries ago, it was dimly lit, with more shadows than light and piles of trash hiding what may lie within.

Anywhere else in the world I would have silently cheered at the luck, but here, in Salvador, it raised the hackles on my neck. Empty roads in Brazil were like hearing the wildlife in a jungle suddenly go quiet, all the birds and monkeys realizing there was a predator afoot.

I was in the historical section of the old capital city, with plenty of folks less than a hundred meters away at restaurants and bars, but nobody was walking down this alley. Meaning there was a reason for the lack of activity. It was counterintuitive to anything I'd felt before, where the bystanders were most often the threat. Crowds allowed camouflage for individual hostiles, like pickpockets, but more important to me, they prevented offensive actions by a team.

There were just too many cameras and cell phones in today's world, devices that recorded an event no matter how careful one was, so an empty alley was the perfect approach for me, and yet, I'd learned in my short time in Brazil that empty meant dangerous. For some reason, the humans here knew not to enter, an instinct that I should pay attention to.

Unfortunately, that was out of the question because a bad guy, my target, held my best friend's life in the balance.

I turned to Aaron, and said, “That damn alley is going to be trouble. I can feel it.”

He knew what I meant. We didn’t worry about the “trouble,” per se; we worried about the mission, and whatever was waiting for us there could hinder that.

He said, “Hey, we only have twelve hours before the clock is up. That’s a blink of an eye for hostage rescue. We need to go tonight, or we’re not stopping what the police have in motion.”

I said, “Shoshana seems to think this is bad juju because of the monks. Maybe she’s right.”

He chuckled and said, “My wife is a little off. Like you.”

I nodded, but still hesitated, running through my options. He squinted his eyes and said, “You believe her. You think this is going to go bad because of what she felt.”

I said, “Aaron, cut the crap. She’s crazy all right, but sometimes she has a point. That’s all.”

He withdrew a Glock pistol, press-checked the chamber, and said, “One way or the other, we need to make a decision. And I think you’re afraid of her saying ‘I told you so’ because of this alley.”

I grunted a laugh and said, “Yeah, something like that. But you’re right. Too late now.”

I clicked my earpiece and said, “Koko, Koko, I’m about to penetrate. What’s your status?”

Koko was the callsign of my partner in crime, Jennifer, so named because she could climb like a monkey. She said, “I’m good. On the roof over the balcony. The OP is in position, and I have a clear shot.”

“Roger, all. Carrie, Carrie, you have lockdown of the front?”

Carrie was Shoshana’s callsign. Because she was bat-shit crazy just like the Stephen King character.

Ironically, the man I was working to save had anointed both of

them with their call signs. Which is why they were both willing to risk their lives to free him. They loved him as much as I did.

She came back, “This is Carrie. Front is secure. But I still think this is a mistake. We should not be assaulting a church. It’s bad. Bad all the way around.”

I looked at Aaron and said, “Yeah, I agree, but I don’t get to pick where terrorists stay. I just wipe out the nest, wherever that ends up.”

She said, “It’s not the church itself. It’s something else.”

I took that in, then looked down the alley. I said, “You want to help here? I think I have your bad feeling, too.”

She said nothing on the net. Aaron whispered, “Good call. The front is facing the tourists. She’s not needed out there. Get her in play.”

Through a combination of means, we’d tracked our target to the back of an old convent tacked on to a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Called the São Francisco Church, it had existed since the sixteenth century, with an ornate Gothic façade that now was the anchor of a square housing outdoor cafes and art galleries.

The front of the church—and the square it faced—was a completely safe place for tourists in the old capital of Salvador, but just outside the light, down the cobblestone streets we were on, the predators prowled, waiting on a stray lamb to leave the lights and laughter.

I took a look down the dimly lit alley, seeing the narrow confines of the ancient street snaking down the left-hand wall of the church, reconsidering whom I was asking for help. I’d left Shoshana to pull security within the crowds of tourists for a reason.

Off the net, to Aaron, I said, “I’m not sure that’s so smart. She’s better protecting us defensively. Out front. Away from the action.”

Aaron said, “Because you don’t trust her offensively?”

“You’re damn right. She’s a walking disaster. Better for Jennifer to do it.”

“Jennifer’s on the roof. Shoshana’s perfect for this and you know it. Jennifer would be better as bait, with her blond hair and innocence, but Shoshana’s the next-best thing.”

He turned away for a moment, then looked me in the eye, saying, “Shoshana’s a killer, but she’s pure. She won’t do anything if it’s not warranted. Honestly, I’m more concerned about you.”

Aaron had seen what I was capable of, and he was hitting at the core of the mission. Could I maintain control? It was a good question, because in an earlier life, he’d almost killed me, and in so doing, he’d killed a friend of mine. The results hadn’t been pretty. He’d seen what I was capable of when I was walking the edge, leaning way over, and now I was operating in that same zone. Something he knew about.

I said, “I’m good. Don’t worry about me. Just worry about the threat.”

He nodded, but I could see he wasn’t convinced.

Shoshana came back on the net, whispering with an urgency neither Aaron nor I understood, “You feel something too, Nephilim?”

Aaron grinned, and I returned it, holding up a finger before he got on the net. I said, “Yeah, but it’s not because of some damn ancient church. It’s because I can’t get to entry. I don’t want a gunfight. I need quiet, which means I need you.”

“So you want me to do what?”

“Walk down this alley from the back. Expose any threat that may prevent our entry.”

She said nothing for a moment, then came back, “That’s what you want? Me as bait?”

Aaron’s eyes widened, and I saw him reaching to key his mike, him saying, “That’s not how to get her to execute.”

I held up my hand again and beat him to the punch, saying, “Carrie, this is the threat. *This* is what I feel. And this is what I need.”

Aaron and I looked at each other, and I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket. Shoshana came back on and said, “This is Carrie. I’m moving to the south of the alley. I’ll be coming south to north. I’ll have the light on my phone going.”

I pulled out my cell, saw it was Jennifer, and realized she didn’t want to talk on the open net. I held it up, then whispered to Aaron, “Tell Shoshana that all we need is to flush out any threats. We’ll handle it. I don’t need any crazy shit here. She just walks toward us until someone triggers. Or until she reaches us without a trigger.”

Aaron nodded and I answered the phone, saying, “What?”

Jennifer said, “You’re going to let Shoshana loose in that alley, after you felt a threat? Let’s back off. Attack a different way.”

I saw a pinpoint of light at the back of the alley and said, “Too late. She’s in.”

Jennifer said, “That’s a bad call. She’ll kill anyone who threatens her.”

I said, “If it’s the guys that we’re hunting, I don’t give a shit.”

She said, “Pike, don’t go there—”

And I hung up, watching the light. Not wanting to think about what I’d just said. Not after what had happened to my friend. She knew where I was headed, because she’d seen it once before. I knew it, too.

The difference was I wanted it.

The light bounced down the alley until it was abreast of our entry point, and Aaron and I began slinking down the lane, hiding from the streetlights behind us, stepping over the trash to avoid the noise. We closed the gap, both wound as tight as a tripwire, waiting. And it came.

Two men assaulted Shoshana from both sides of the alley, one from behind a dumpster and the other from a gap in the bricks.

They slammed into her in a synchronized assault, and we took

off running, reaching them just as they gained the upper hand. I saw one man cinch his hand into Shoshana's hair, then bash her skull into the cobblestones. The second had his arms wrapped around her legs, pulling out a blade that glinted in the moonlight.

They were in total control, right up until we reached them. Aaron slammed his boot into the man holding her hair and I jumped on the man holding her legs. I caught a glimpse of their fight, and then was subsumed with my own.

He began attacking me, attempting to hammer my face with elbows and fists, and then hit me with the knife in my forearm. I blocked the initial blows, returned them with my own, then felt the blade slice through my jacket, nicking my flesh.

The wound he caused split open the blackness, the anger inside me boiling out. I gave him everything I'd bottled up over the last week. I abandoned my "team leader control" and let the beast run free, looking for vengeance.

I battered his face, trapped his wrist against his torso, the blade now useless, circled around his body, and wrapped him up in my arms, pressing his head forward into his chest. He began frothing at the mouth, flailing his one good fist, and then gave up, dropping the knife and raising his other hand in an effort to surrender. It did no good. I wanted a release, and I worked to achieve it. I pressed him further, going deeper, until I felt his neck snap.

The sound split through the pain, jerking me out of my darkness. I let him sink to the ground, looking at Shoshana and Aaron. Both were staring back at me, Shoshana holding the other attacker in a joint lock, facedown on the ground.

She said, "You were worried about me going crazy? What was that?"

I shook my head, clearing the beast, not sure what I'd done. I said, "Let's go. Put him out."

She nodded, then asked, "Permanently?"

Because that's just how she thinks.

Not liking what I'd just done, I said, "No. Not permanently."

She said, "He's Russian. He's not a common predator. He's here for *you*."

For the first time, I noticed that the man I'd fought wasn't from Brazil. I searched him, finding a passport from Saint Kitts. The same passport I'd found on the Russian I'd killed in Charleston. The one who had murdered my friend.

The blackness came rushing back.

This is all tied together. And it ends now.

She looked at me expectantly, and I closed my eyes, reliving the explosion and the charred body.

Shoshana said, "Pike?"

I locked eyes with Aaron, and he didn't flinch, just stared at me, letting me make the choice. Not judging in any way.

A part of me wanted to call Jennifer. Wanting someone to stop the slide I was on. She was the only one who could prevent it. I didn't. Like a junkie feeling the heroin, I enjoyed what I was doing.

I stepped over the edge of the abyss.

"Kill him."

CHAPTER 2

One Week Ago

Nung heard his boss swear out loud and shout, “Nung! Get your ass out here.”

He stopped packing several laptops and rose from a pelican case. He tossed in some bubble wrap and strode to the front of the company’s makeshift do-it-yourself office, more of a trailer than a structure. He opened the aluminum door, feeling the oppressive humidity of Myanmar hit and begin to soak his shirt, a relentless cycle that didn’t faze him, unlike the men he worked for. Being from Thailand, he had long ago ceased caring about the sweat/air conditioner sequence, but the men who’d hired him despised the furnace of Myanmar. He poked his head out and saw his boss attempting to talk in sign language to a Burmese official. Meaning they were doing nothing but waving their arms.

His boss saw him and shouted, “Come on. Get over here.”

He called himself Domingo, but Nung didn’t believe that was his boss’s name, because he knew the man was from Russia. Well, he didn’t *know* Domingo was from Russia, but the fact that he spoke Russian was an indicator. The subterfuge wasn’t particularly alarming to Nung, as he’d spent most of his life straddling the gray area between legal and illegal. In the end, Nung hadn’t questioned the name because he, himself, was operating under the same subterfuge—his name wasn’t Nung, the Thai word for “one,” just as his brother wasn’t named

Song, for the Thai word for “two.” The similarities, though, ended at the use of an alias, because Nung took his job seriously, wanting to earn his pay.

Unlike Domingo.

Nung reached the scrum, seeing Domingo’s false eye staring off into space, something that was always disconcerting to him. He never understood why the man didn’t wear a patch—or at least make sure his eye was looking forward. He heard Domingo say to the other contractor, in Russian, “This idiot is as bad as the dumb asses we were hired to help. Thank God this contract is over.”

Nung showed no emotion. The men he worked with had no idea he understood Russian, and he wanted to keep it that way. He’d learned plenty about their operations over the past four months on the contract, and all of it could be lucrative for his father and family.

A lithe man of just under six feet, he was taller than most Thais because of his heritage. His father was American—a Caucasian who’d flown for Air America out of Thailand during the secret war in Laos and Cambodia, where he’d worked more than just an aircraft for the CIA. After the war had ended, his father had stayed in Thailand, using the contacts he’d developed during the war to create a black market empire in the seedy underbelly of Bangkok. He’d married a Thai, and had raised his sons in the family business. Because of it, Nung had grown up—not *immoral*, but certainly amoral.

His father had owned a brothel in the famed Patpong red-light district, which catered to foreign nationals. Unlike the other brothels that trafficked in underage boys and rough sex, he’d trafficked in exotic women. Russians, Swedes, Ukrainians. You name it, he had them.

Nung grew up in that world, so much that when his mother had died when he was at the age of four, he’d been raised by a Russian nanny. A woman his father had taken a liking to and had pulled out

of the lineup for a softer life. She'd shown a greater intelligence than most his father had brought over, but the winning attribute was a true affection for his sons.

The woman had been his life for years while his father worked, never acting as if she was doing anything for money, showing what he had later learned was love. A strange concept he'd never understood as a child, given his father's transactional life.

She was killed in a car accident after Nung had gone to a university, but her lasting legacy had been a touchstone of caring that was the only bit of emotion he had. Well, that and the fact he could speak Russian. Something he kept hidden from his current employer.

He knew that Domingo had no idea, the thought fanciful. How could a Thai hired to work in Myanmar speak Russian?

But he did.

In English, the chosen language between them, Nung said, "What's the problem?"

Domingo said, "The problem is I can't tell what this idiot is asking. We were told to clear out of this camp now that it's operational but he wants to keep our sensors. That's not happening. He wants them, he can buy his own."

Nung worked for a group of Russians called Wagner, a private military contractor from the Russian Federation that had been hired by the government of Myanmar to help with the repatriation of the Rohingya, a persecuted group who had fled from a genocidal effort by the government to eradicate them from existence.

They were a Muslim subset of the population of Myanmar, with its own language and customs, and the government had tried to kill them off for years, but really ramped up efforts in 2017, in a concerted attempt to cause them to flee or die, a final solution.

After the rapes, murders, and burning of villages, the government got what they wanted; the Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, like they'd

done for decades before, but this time it had a new twist; the world was more connected, and the atrocities were caught on the internet. It was, in fact, a genocide.

Embarrassed, the government of Myanmar had begun trotting out a hundred excuses for what had occurred, and offered to repatriate the ones who'd fled. And that was where Nung came in.

Now wanting to look like the good guys, the government had begun receiving the people back into the Rakhine State, albeit into refugee camps because their homes had been burned to the ground by government troops. Wagner had been contracted to build the camps. And they needed local help.

Nung, because he spoke the language, had been hired through his father's contacts to interact with the Burmese. It wasn't lost on him that even though they'd reached out to his father for help, they were not as respectable as the Red Cross.

He didn't mind, though. He could take the insults and the less-than-noble actions he witnessed Wagner conduct. It was all business.

Until it wasn't.

Nung saw Domingo push the man, then said, "What's the problem? Let it go. Those sensors were paid for by the contract. You've already made the money on them."

"Bullshit. That's wrong. They paid for my services. If they want the sensors, then they need to buy their own. Tell him he's fucked."

Nung said some words to the official, and he began waving his arms again, incensed. Domingo slapped the Burmese official's hands out of the air, and Nung considered translating the wrong way and causing a fight. He'd seen how the Burmese treated the Rohingya, and it wasn't as pure as the state propaganda machine put out. The man in front of him was just as bad as the man behind him. They were both evil, and it would be nice to see them destroy each other.

He did not.

In short order, he had the situation resolved, the Burmese official walking away in a huff. He turned to the Russian and said, “Continue packing?”

Domingo said, “Yeah. I want to be out of this shithole in the next four hours. Let them deal with it now.”

Two hours later, Nung finished sealing the rest of the office equipment while Domingo and the other man talked in the shallow office to his left. As usual, they were speaking in Russian, and as usual, Nung was listening. He didn’t really care what they did with the Rohingya, because he was paid for a service, and he provided it. But in his heart he did. He hated the Russians because of what he’d seen. They hadn’t done a damn thing to really help the refugees because the government hadn’t cared. It was all a joke for the press.

The Rohingya members had been abused and castigated from the moment they’d created the first camp, and nobody seemed to give a damn, least of all the Russians of Wagner—which was the express purpose the Russians had hired him: helping to facilitate the resettlement of the refugees. It aggravated him. He could deal with the blood and violence, because he’d done it himself, but it was always against an enemy who understood the rules. Not a bunch of families that were being persecuted solely because of their heritage.

He’d called his father only once, and had been told to continue, because the Russian connection was a good one, and he’d been forced to choose. Family meant everything to him. There was no allegiance beyond that. Family was all. And so he’d continued. But he held a growing hatred, and while they treated him as the hired local help, they had no idea of his skills.

Luckily for them, they’d never see it, and he could finally go home, serving his father and expanding the family business.

Shoving more bubble wrap into another pelican case, Nung heard

Domingo talking on a phone in the next room. He heard discussions about an operation in Brazil, and then Domingo became heated with the man on the phone, saying his men were already there and they couldn't afford another compromise like the one in France.

Nung perked up, no longer packing the case. Domingo glanced out the door and said, "No, nobody can hear me. I'm working with savages."

Then he said, "Are you sure? The same ones who killed Tagir? They're in Brazil?"

Nung worked around the box, pretending to pack but really moving closer to the door. He heard, "Yeah, I got the email. I'm looking at it right now. Are you asking what to do? I'll tell you what to do. Cut the head off of the snake. You know where he is. You got the information for Grolier Services, right?"

Nung heard the words and had to physically stop himself from showing a reaction. Domingo continued, "I don't care who they saw in Brazil, you kill that fuck in Charleston, and it'll end. Get it done."

He heard the phone slam, then Domingo stormed out of the office, looking at Nung and saying, "What the hell is taking so long? Pack that shit up."

Nung said, "What's the rush? We've been here for four months."

Domingo said, "It looks like I'm going to Brazil, and I need to leave immediately. Get it done."

Nung nodded, watching him stomp out of the trailer. As soon as the door had closed, he went into the small office where Domingo had talked. The one with the desktop computer he was not allowed to access. He saw the window on the computer was open, the time-out for the password not yet engaged.

He went to email. He glanced behind him, seeing the outside door

still closed. He pulled up the first email and saw nothing but Cyrillic lettering. He cursed under his breath.

While he'd learned to speak Russian, he couldn't read it. He highlighted all of it, then pasted it into Google Translate. The words that came out were a little schizophrenic, like an old telegram, but there was enough for him to make out:

The group highlight in Switzerland be highlight in Brazil. Two members seen in Salvador. Cannot stop say who else is involved. But military contract people not people might prevent success. Presidential campaign is reaching apex and that though Lulu oilfields are in doubt. Recommend another Operation Harvest. Target Grolier Recovery Services now, before they harvest operation.

Nung read the words, and inwardly curled. What he'd heard earlier was correct. They were after Grolier Services. He had no idea why, but it made him bristle.

He heard the door slam open outside, and closed down the Google Translate page. He went outside the small office and saw Domingo glaring at him.

He said, "What?"

Domingo said, "What, what? What the fuck are you doing? Pack this shit up. I want to go."

"I was looking at preparing the desktop in your office."

"Don't touch that. I'll do that myself. I have to use the sat dish to get some plane tickets. Those fucks in Moscow want me to fly tonight. It never ends."

Nung said, "To Charleston, in the United States?"

"Fuck no, someone else is doing the easy work. I have to go to Moscow, then Brazil." And then something clicked in Domingo's brain. "How the fuck do you know about Charleston?"

Nung reverted to what Domingo knew; a dumb-ass savage. He ducked his head in supplication and said, “When you were on the phone, the only word I heard you say in English was Charleston. I’ll get this packed up soon.”

Domingo nodded, staring at him for a beat. Nung knew for all his bluster, he was not a dumb man. He’d seen it over five months. Nung bent down to the closest pelican case, packing up office equipment, and waited, feeling his eyes on him.

After five brutal seconds, Domingo left, shouting at his men. And Nung made his decision.

He knew the man who owned Grolier Recovery Services. He knew what that man had done for his younger brother. And he knew that only one thing counted in this world.

Family.

Something Domingo would learn the hard way.

CHAPTER 3

Amena found me in the bathroom and said, “Why do you pick such fights? This is supposed to be a party.”

Looking in the mirror, and honestly a little embarrassed at my actions, I said, “Because it’s just some friends coming over. We don’t need to turn this into a New Year’s Eve gala.”

She caught my eye in the reflection and said, “So you guys are fighting because you don’t want to work? Is that it?”

I turned from the mirror, and she continued, “I’m not saying you’re wrong. I’m just trying to learn what to expect here in America.”

I knew she was toying with me, because she was smart as a whip and had picked up “being American” within a few weeks of arrival, now acting like any other thirteen-year-old teenager.

Amena was a refugee from Syria who had done some good deeds for America. Well, that’s putting it lightly. She’d saved a ton of lives, all because she thought it was the right thing to do, risking her own life and almost giving it in the process. And because of it, I’d saved hers, bringing her to the United States.

Taller than an average thirteen-year-old, with tan skin, black hair, and black eyes, she was beautiful in an exotic sort of way. Her looks caused tourists to comment when we were out and about on the peninsula, asking where she was from, which initially aggravated the hell out of me. I was trying to protect her status, and some bloated lady from a cruise ship would act like she wanted to pet the strange ani-

mal. I took it as an insult, but Amena never did. She thought it was a compliment, and honestly, she *was* something exotic. In more ways than one.

Playacting like she was trying to determine how a man and woman behaved in America, she was really trying to cool the fight, because she was torn between loving me or loving Jennifer. She wanted us both.

I turned to her and said, "No, this isn't how it is in America. I'm just being an asshole."

She giggled and said, "Then why do you do it?"

"Because I'm stubborn."

She nodded and said, "I know. Now what?"

I sighed and said, "Now I have to eat crow."

And I'd finally said something American that made no sense to Amena. She scrunched her eyes and said, "Eat crow? Like a bird?"

I said, "It's just a saying that means I have to go admit I was wrong. How about you go out there and assist? With something too big for you to do? And then you come back here and ask me to help?"

She caught on immediately and raced out, wanting to end any disagreement between her hero, Jennifer, and me. Wanting to get back to the affection that gave her a blanket of security. Thirty seconds later, she was back, saying, "Can you help me with the tray of shrimp? It's too big for me to move."

I smiled, which brought out a grin of her own, and out we went.

I entered our living room, saw Jennifer scowling, and Amena said, "He's going to help me. Because I can't move it."

I looked at Jennifer and said, "I can't tell her no."

Jennifer's expression softened, and I knew she understood this was my way of giving in. She motioned me over, saying, "I could use some help as well."

I went to her, and she put her arms around my neck and kissed me

on the lips. “It would be a lot easier if you just did the work, without the fighting.”

I grinned and said, “I know.”

Jennifer gave me a radiant smile back, melting any notion of contradicting whatever she wanted, and Amena practically broke the windows with her own beaming face, happy to have solved the dilemma.

Although deep inside, I *still* thought this was bullshit. All we should have been doing was packing.

Jennifer and I were slated for a mission in Brazil in a few days, hunting some Hezbollah financiers at the tri-border region, and normally such preparation would be old hat, but now we had Amena. We were working to find her a permanent home, but that took time.

Jennifer had come up with a stroke of brilliance, asking Kylie Hale, the niece of Kurt Hale, the commander of our unit, if she would house-sit while we were gone. Kylie had some history with Jennifer—meaning once upon a time, Jennifer had saved her life. She was currently wandering about trying to put her recent degree in English literature to use—meaning she was researching graduate schools—so she’d readily jumped at the chance to travel to Charleston for a salary that involved nothing more than watching Amena.

She’d arrived yesterday to become acquainted with our routine, and I thought we were set. Then she’d asked if her boyfriend could visit while we were gone. I didn’t have a problem with that, because her boyfriend also happened to be on my team, and he was following Jennifer and me to Brazil shortly, so it wasn’t like he could get in any trouble. I’d said fine, and she informed me he was coming today, suspiciously sounding like it had already been planned. Just to cap it off, later in the day, my commander, Colonel Kurt Hale, called and said he was passing through town and wanted to visit—which I knew was

bullshit. Kurt was never just “passing through.” There was an agenda in play, but with all three descending on our house, Jennifer had decided to throw a party, which made me grumpy.

Jennifer saw I was still less than enthusiastic and said, “Why don’t you head to the store? I forgot a few things that I need for tonight. Amena and I can finish up here.”

I jumped at the chance, snatching a grocery list out of her hand and racing toward the door.

“Take the Jeep,” she said, “My car’s blocked in.” And I knew she was punishing me. It was only October, and Charleston should have still been a muggy swelter, but we’d had an early cold snap, making the air temperature about fifty degrees. She knew I hadn’t replaced the top to the Jeep, and would therefore freeze while driving it.

I didn’t care, because driving that beat-up CJ was better than her little Mini Cooper. It was my pride and joy—and a tax write-off, because it was our company vehicle, the rear quarter panel adorned with an emblem that said Grolier Recovery Services.

I climbed in, turned the old-fashioned key, and backed out our little drive, inching into the street while praying nobody slammed into me.

On the surface, Grolier Recovery Services helped facilitate archeological work around the world, and to that end, Jennifer and I made a pretty good living. We did about three jobs to one in the real world, working for various agencies that wanted the best at deciphering the mundane world of geopolitics and antiquities. The remaining job was what we really existed for—finding a bad guy and planting him in the ground, paid for courtesy of the United States government.

The cover work that facilitated our ability to conduct counterterrorism operations around the world had been pretty lucrative—enough to buy a small two-story row house on Wentworth Street just

off East Bay on the Charleston Peninsula. It was a little fixer-upper with a narrow gravel drive on the side just big enough to fit three cars end to end. Jennifer and I were constantly rotating vehicles in and out, but the worst part was getting onto Wentworth Street from the blind alley.

I made it out okay and shot over to the Harris Teeter grocery store a couple of blocks away, getting out and reading the list. I immediately realized I should have checked it in Jennifer's presence, because it was full of inscrutable things that caused me to wander the store like a Buddhist monk searching for the secret to life, texting her questions about each item and sending pictures when necessary.

I knew she'd given up when I saw a FaceTime call from her. I answered and she said, "I'm not sure how you managed to make it through life not knowing how a supermarket works."

I said, "I know where the Doritos and beer are located. Sometimes the milk, but you're making me find a bunch of stuff with foreign-sounding names like Gruyère cheese. That stuff wasn't even in the cheese section."

She shook her head, saying, "Just come back with what you have. Kurt's already here. I'll go back out. You win."

I said, "I'm doing my best! I'm almost done."

She glanced away from the phone, and then leaned into the screen, whispering, "He wants to talk, so get your ass home."

I said, "About what?"

She glanced away again, making sure she was out of earshot and said, "I don't know, but I need you here for whatever it is, because I don't think it's good."

CHAPTER 4

As soon as she said it, I knew Kurt was here about Amena. And Jennifer knew that she wouldn't be able to fight whatever he was going to say, but I sure as shit could. It was sort of my specialty.

I nodded and said, "I'm on the way."

Kurt Hale and I had a unique relationship. On the one hand, he was my direct superior—the commander of Project Prometheus and the one who gave me my operational orders. On the other, we were almost as close as brothers, with a deep friendship that had lasted for decades. We'd first met when I was assigned to his troop in a special mission unit, and we had both been promoted up the ranks, serving together multiple times. When he'd created Prometheus under a previous presidential administration, he'd recruited only the best of the best for the teams, and I was his original hire, the first person to go through Prometheus Assessment and Selection. Kurt trusted my judgment, going so far as to allow Jennifer to attempt A&S as a female civilian when everyone else said he was crazy, and I trusted him as a commander. But that didn't mean I wouldn't fight him on Amena.

Like I said before, that was sort of my specialty. While we were closer than blood on the friendship front, when he wore the commander hat, I was more than willing to tell him he was full of shit—and I was one of the few who could get away with it.

Two minutes later I was pulling in behind a late-model rental car, our little drive now three-deep in vehicles. I exited, looked up, and

saw Kurt Hale on my second-floor balcony, leaning on the rail and holding a beer. He said, “Running errands for the partner. How domesticated.”

I smiled, reached in to grab the two small bags I had, and said, “Yeah, well, it pretty much ended in failure. I’ll be right up.”

A minute later I’d given my bags to Jennifer. Kurt was still on the balcony with the door closed. She said, “He’s going to take Amena. That’s why he’s here. He pulled all those strings with the Oversight Council, and now he has to make it good.”

The Oversight Council was the board that oversaw all Project Prometheus activities, which included my team. Nobody ever mentioned the program name out loud, calling everyone associated with it an innocuous nickname: the Taskforce. While GRS was doing pretty well on the commercial front—enough to let us buy this house—it’s primary purpose was as a cover to allow penetration of denied areas for one reason: to drive a stake into the heart of threats that could affect U.S. national interests.

I knew the Council was not happy with my decision to bring Amena to the United States because it had caused too many questions about how she jumped the line, potentially exposing the cover of GRS. How does a barely there company bring home a refugee and pass through customs and immigration without a hitch? The answer was because I had some people on my side, very important people who’d greased the skids. And that was making the Oversight Council nervous, since it would take only one thread to unwind the GRS cover, which would then unwind Project Prometheus and jeopardize the careers of anyone associated with it. Because Project Prometheus was decidedly illegal. An extrajudicial killing machine that was sanctioned at the highest level.

I passed Jennifer the bags and said, “I couldn’t find the damn cheese you wanted.”

Amena came up, pointed at the balcony, and said, “Why is he here? Is it me?”

She was like an animal that could smell a threat, having lived on the edge of survival for much of her short life. I looked at her and saw the pain of losing the first bit of sanctuary she’d ever experienced. And I realized I didn’t want her to leave. For the first time in close to a decade—really since the loss of my family—I was content with my life, and I wanted that feeling to remain.

I brushed her cheek and said, “Don’t worry about it. At least for this trip.”

“Promise?”

I said, “Yes, doodlebug. I promise.”

Jennifer heard me use the nickname that was once my daughter’s and smiled. Amena relaxed. I turned to Jennifer, saying, “Just keep getting ready. I’ll see what’s up.”

I grabbed a couple of beers and exited onto my upper balcony. I shook Kurt’s hand, handed him another beer, and he said, “I hear Kylie is your new nanny.”

I said, “I guess that depends. What’s up with the sudden visit?”

He demurred, saying, “Looks like GRS is making more money than I remembered. This is a pretty nice house.”

Which wasn’t really true. It was an old row house that required enormous maintenance against plumbing leaks, pests, and electrical problems, but it *was* on the peninsula of Charleston, which was pretty cool.

I said, “So you want to cut my pay? Is that it? Because the Taskforce doesn’t pay me nearly what I’m worth. I get a fortune helping some university do nothing more than excavate a dig. Shit, the last three jobs I did bought this house. I get peanuts from you dodging bullets.”

He laughed and said, “I should have never let you two go find that temple in Guatemala. I’ve never heard the end of it.”

“You never would have had GRS without it. We’re the deepest cover organization you have.”

He turned serious and said, “What’s the status with Brazil?”

I said, “We’ve got the contract locked in with the university for the Jesuit UNESCO site, and it’s a stone’s throw from the triple frontier. Easy for us to work there and penetrate the area.”

The triple frontier—or tri-border region—was the juncture of the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, a Wild West area heavy with Hezbollah activity. GRS always had to have a reason for operating, and we’d found one in the Rio Grande do Sul state in southern Brazil, an ancient Jesuit church called São Miguel das Missões that was slowly falling apart. A university, in coordination with the United Nations, wanted to stop the passage of time, and they’d hired us to help facilitate. Which was perfect, because we were going to use it to put some Hezbollah heads on a spike.

Kurt said, “Sounds like it’s tracking.”

“It is. Knuckles and Brett are already down there, prepping the battlefield. They head to Salvador in a couple of days, and Jennifer and I will link up with them there. But you know that. You’re the one who fought to keep them on my team.”

I was unique in the Taskforce in that I was a pure civilian now. Brett was a paramilitary member of the CIA and Knuckles was in the Navy. It had been a fight to allow me—now a civilian—to be the team leader of active-duty guys, but neither Brett nor Knuckles would have it any other way. We were a family that had bled together when *I* was on active duty, and while others in the government fought the decision on purely bureaucratic grounds, Kurt understood what teamwork meant.

In the end, the Taskforce was a strange beast, and it was just one more permutation from the norm. Kurt Hale had fought for me, and

I'd regained my leadership position after I'd left active duty. After I'd crawled out of the abyss.

He just nodded, and I could tell he was thinking about something else.

I said, "Okay, sir, what's the point of this visit? It isn't our trip to Brazil, because you see those SITREPs. Just get it out."

He sighed, then looked at me, saying, "The Council has found a place for Amena. But you're not going to like it."

"What's that mean?"

"They want to repatriate her into the system. Put her into the refugee flow back in Syria."

He saw my face and said, "Wait, wait, she won't be put back into danger. She'll just be placed in a camp outside of Syria, either Jordan or Lebanon, and she'll get preferential treatment. She'll be back here in a year, maybe less."

I looked at him and said, "Are you fucking serious? Is that what *you* would do?"

He frowned and said, "Pike, there is more at risk here than her. I'm trying to do the best thing for her, but you short-circuited that. Don't blame me. *You're* the one who brought her here on a covert aircraft after a covert mission. It's hard to explain."

I leaned back and said, "So she's not worth the destruction she will cause if anyone makes the connection."

He nodded and said, "That's about it. I'm here on behalf of the Oversight Council. They wanted to jerk her ass outright. I told them to hold off."

I said, "How much time do I have?"

"What? You have no time. This is it."

"Bullshit. I'm going to Brazil in the next few days. How much time can you get me?"

“What do you mean?”

“Let me get this mission done first. Give me some time to cushion the blow. Don’t take her tomorrow. Sell it as ‘Pike’s gone on a Task-force mission. Can’t take her now.’ How hard is that?”

He said, “I don’t know if I can do that.”

I said, “Sir, I’m asking. I have never asked before. Give me this. I’ve given you my blood. *She’s* given you *her* blood. All I’m asking is for a trip. Fuck those assholes in the Oversight Council.”

He nodded, not looking at me. He said, “Okay, Pike. I’m with you. I’ll delay it, but it’s going to happen. You need to get your head around that.”

I said, “I’ll get my head around it when I need to. She’s not going back to Syria. That’s the end of it. Fuck the Oversight Council.”

He looked at me to see if I was serious, and Jennifer came out on the balcony, saying, “Pike, I have to go back to the store. You didn’t get everything I needed.”

She’d clearly heard what I’d said and was trying to defuse the situation. And it worked. Kurt and I stared at each other for a beat, then he said, “I’ll go. You guys stay here.”

I said, “Sir, you don’t want to try to find what she’s making. It’s impossible.”

He laughed and said, “Not everyone is a Neanderthal. Let me go. You guys need to talk.”

He walked back into the house, and Jennifer looked at me. I shook my head. Amena peered at me behind the door, and I felt crushed. All I’d done was give her hope, and now that was going to be devastated.

Jennifer followed behind him, and I could see her giving him instructions on what to buy, the things that I’d missed. I watched him go down the stairs, and then saw him appear below me. He looked up and said, “I can’t get out.”

I said, "Take my Jeep."

I tossed the keys down, and he caught them, looked at the Jeep, and said, "This is probably the biggest risk I've taken since I was running shotgun with you in Iraq."

I laughed and said, "And I kept you alive then."

He crawled into my CJ-7, stuck in the key, turned the ignition, and an explosion erupted, shredding his life in a fireball that turned the Jeep into a shrapnel blast of flying parts.

I was thrown back, feeling the shock wave of the explosion and dully hearing the tinkling of auto parts spackling the roof.

I sat up, staring in shock at the inferno below me, the Jeep burning furiously. It made no sense. I couldn't get my mind around it. I saw the body in the driver's seat, slumped over with its hair on fire, an arm dangling outside the door by a piece of tendon still connected to the shoulder, and felt a helplessness. I placed my hands on the railing and began to squeeze, a white-hot rage coursing through my body.

Kurt Hale was my mentor, my protector, and the man I always wanted to emulate. The one man I had always wanted to be. He had been family, and now he was dead. Because of me.

Because I was the target.