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TAYLOR**

**INTO THE
GRAY ZONE**

A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

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Into the Gray Zone

A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

Brad Taylor

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The “gray zone” describes a set of activities that occur between peace (or cooperation) and war (or armed conflict). A multitude of activities fall into this murky in-between—from nefarious economic activities, influence operations, and cyberattacks to mercenary operations, assassinations, and disinformation campaigns. While the United States has spent more than two decades focused on its conventional power, Russia and China have occupied the gray zone where they can pressure, coerce, destabilize, and attack the United States and its allies without risking conventional escalation.

—Clementine G. Starling, deputy director of the Forward Defense practice and a resident fellow in the Transatlantic Security Initiative

One can argue that activities in the gray zone have always been a feature of great-power competition. Proxy wars, destabilizing insurgencies, legal warfare (lawfare), and information warfare—by adversaries and allies alike—have been a feature of conflict for millennia. But the cost of conventional conflict in the nuclear era has grown too steep, and the risk of escalation too profound. As a result, nations seek to promote their national objectives through aggression conducted covertly, or with obfuscated attribution or justification, in order to achieve their goals.

—Robert J. Giesler, nonresident senior fellow in Forward Defense who served in a number of senior roles within the Office of the Secretary of Defense

INTO THE GRAY ZONE

CHAPTER 1

A full moon created a kaleidoscope of reflections on the Arabian Sea, but Kamal could smell the rain coming. It was the tail-end of the monsoon season, and they would get wet tonight, he was sure. In more ways than one.

He watched a rubber Zodiac skiff lowered over the side of the larger boat, waited until it was stable, then scampered down a cargo net into it. He turned, took a duffel bag from the man above him, set it on the deck, then began helping the others. The last of the four slipped coming down, bouncing off the rubber side and falling backwards toward the hull of the mother ship. He let out a scream, the sound cut short when his body went beneath the water.

Kamal scrambled to the stern, holding the skiff away from the larger boat to prevent his man from being smashed between the two in the light chop of waves.

He shouted, “Agam! Randeep! Grab him.” The two others in the boat leaned over and snatched the man by his arm and clothes, hoisting him over the gunwale. The man sat up and Kamal saw it was Manjit, his second-in-command and the one who was to guide the skiff to their target.

With a sheepish smile, Manjit shook his head, throwing water like a dog coming out of a lake. He said, “That’s not a good beginning.”

Kamal looked up at the larger boat and saw the man they only knew as Mr. Chin staring back at him. Mr. Chin raised his fist with a thumbs-up, the gesture a question. Kamal said, “Manjit, start the outboard.”

Manjit scrambled to the back, pulled a cord, and the little motor sputtered to life. Satisfied, Kamal returned the thumbs-up. Mr. Chin shouted, “See you in an hour. Remember, he either comes out alive, or you kill him yourself. Leave no one to talk if the mission fails.”

Kamal nodded, a little disgusted. He didn’t fully understand who Mr. Chin represented, but he knew the reason behind the order: China could not be implicated in interfering in India’s affairs.

Kamal turned to Manjit and said, “Let’s go.”

Within seconds they were bouncing across the soft waves, the lights of the shore growing larger, the mother ship lost in the darkness. He felt the wind tussling his hair and realized it was the first time he’d had that sensation since he was a little boy.

Like the men in the boat with him, Kamal was a Sikh, and as such, was required by his religious duty to wear a dastar covering his head whenever he was outdoors, only unwrapping the cloth when inside his home. Like him, none of his men wore one on this night, and neither did the man they hoped to rescue. In fact, the very reason they were conducting this nighttime operation was precisely to prevent the authorities from learning the man they held was not a potential Muslim terrorist but a Sikh.

Kamal Singh and his men were all from a small village in the Punjab state of India, and all of them had spent time in jail as agitators for a separate Sikh state—regardless of whether that was true or not. Called Khalistan, the aspirational goals of a Sikh state within the borders of

India were something the Indian government was incredibly sensitive about.

In today's world, it's usually Muslim terrorists that make the news. Al Qaida, the Islamic state, and, for India, Pakistani groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba. But in the not-so-distant past, it was members of the Khalistan Commando Force—Sikh separatists looking for a state they could call their own.

In the 1980s, the KCF caused most of the Indian national terrorist deaths, to include aircraft bombings in Canada and murderous attacks all over the Indian state, so much so that Indira Gandhi, then the prime minister of India, decided to stop it once and for all. In 1984 she ordered the storming of the holiest of Sikh religious sites looking for the leaders of the movement, ultimately killing upwards of four hundred innocent Sikhs in the process.

The action directly led to her own demise, as she was assassinated shortly thereafter in retribution—by her own Sikh bodyguards. That killing ultimately led to the destruction of the Khalistan Commando Force, as the Indian population erupted, slaughtering Sikhs in an orgy of violence while the state itself made a concerted effort to snuff out the irredentist tendencies.

To a great extent, they succeeded, at least on the surface, but the fear of the Khalistan myth within the Indian government persisted like an abused housewife fearing the return of the husband, with Sikhs who professed any discontent being arrested and charged with wholesale offenses against the state. Which is how Kamal had been arrested.

He'd never been particularly in tune with the underbelly of Sikh separatism and had little knowledge of Khalistan aspirations. His father had been infatuated with the cause, but his mother less so. Kamal was only ten when his father had died in a car accident. After that, his mother steered clear of anything resembling Sikh independence, forcing

him to try to blend his Sikh faith into a multicultural world. Which is to say, he'd heard about Khalistan, but it wasn't something he put any thought into. He'd gone to school, learning computer network operations, and had a solid job working remotely for a U.S. company, doing customer support for computer systems. That all changed once he was incarcerated.

Arrested for some inflammatory social media posts and connections to friends who were being tracked as separatists—something that everyone in his Sikh-majority town fell prey to—his life had been upended. Prison had caused his anger to fester, and also introduced him to others who'd been unjustly arrested. They began to talk, fantasizing about revenge, long-lost memories of his father talking about the cause resurfacing. Ultimately, grand visions of Sikh independence had taken a back seat to survival, although it had lingered in the back of Kamal's brain. What Kamal had actually learned in prison was how to be a criminal.

Released from prison but now tainted by his arrest, he'd been unable to find a job using his computer networking skills, with every one of his former corporate contacts afraid of being associated with him. The fester in the back of his brain slowly started moving to the forefront, and he began to explore the cause his mother had jettisoned but his father had embraced. Just to survive, he'd worked in the seedy underbelly of Indian society, utilizing the black market for everything from crypto scams to call centers fleecing Americans.

And that was how he'd met Mr. Chin.

Manjit slowed the motor of the rubber skiff, bringing Kamal out of his thoughts. He turned, seeing him looking at a GPS. Manjit said, "The dock should be right in front of us."

Kamal said, "And? Keep going."

"We need to work this slowly, in case Mr. Chin's information is wrong."

“If his information is wrong, it won’t matter. The RAW will be behind us right now, waiting to scoop us up. But he hasn’t been wrong yet.”

Manjit kept the engine low, saying, “Then why is Sidak in jail? There weren’t supposed to be any RAW personnel at the target site.”

The RAW was the vaunted Research and Analysis Wing of the government of India—the Indian version of the CIA or MI6, but unlike those organizations, the RAW answered only to the prime minister. Different from intelligence services in other democracies, the RAW was a force unto its own, with little oversight. It was the RAW that had arrested Kamal originally, and had also detained Sidak.

Kamal couldn’t argue with Manjit’s logic. The RAW *had* been there and rolled up Sidak, when Mr. Chin said it would be safe.

Kamal considered, then said, “Continue at this pace.” He hissed to the front, saying, “Agam, get out the night scope. Scan the dock.”

CHAPTER 2

Exasperated, I threw the handful of receipts on the desk and said, “You told me this would take ten minutes! It’s been two hours. I’ll never find all the paper you want from that long ago.”

Jennifer gave me her disapproving teacher look and said, “It would have taken only ten minutes if you had some sort of filing system. How come all my receipts are filed neatly, but when I ask you for *your* receipts, you’re digging through duffel bags and rucksacks?”

Wearing a ballcap with a blond ponytail coming out the back, she looked like she was about to go surfing instead of analyzing our accounts. Seated behind a computer with a spreadsheet displayed, she was trying to match up our claimed deductible expenditures with the proof they were actually true.

It was time for our quarterly update to our accountant for corporate taxes, and I hated this paperwork bullshit. Which is why Jennifer did it all. She was now asking for rental car receipts, clothing purchases, ferry tickets, and other items to match up to the spreadsheet. Receipts that I’d supposedly saved but now had no idea where I’d stored them. It was ridiculous. Why wouldn’t the U.S. government just assume I was telling the truth?

I said, "Look, this is all I have. This is it. If we're missing a taxi receipt, then we're just missing a taxi receipt. Nobody's going to check."

She said, "Until they do. We can't risk that."

Which, as much as I hated to admit it, was absolutely true. Our company was called Grolier Recover Services, and as far as the overt U.S. government knew, it was an above-board business that specialized in facilitating archeological work around the world. Unfortunately, that wasn't exactly accurate.

I waved my arm at a rifle case holding a custom AR 10 chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor, saying, "If I don't get on the road, I'll lose the shooting lane to some prima donna with an eight-thousand-dollar bolt gun trying to figure out if the brass casing he's using affects the flight of the bullet. Let me go. Please."

She said, "Speaking of that, I'm not sure we should claim the range membership as a deduction. I mean, that's going to cause questions."

"Questions? For what? That's literally how we make money. You do the egghead stuff, and I do the Neanderthal stuff. People hire us because we keep them alive, and shooting this gun is what does that."

Our company was a little unique in that we didn't do the digging for the artifacts, we basically sold the shovels. In the world of archeological relics, it turns out that the majority of the digs around the earth were in areas that were less than hospitable, with most being in regions wracked by strife. So if you wanted to go dig up some bones somewhere, you needed someone to facilitate it, which is where we came in.

Jennifer used her degree in anthropology to convince them we understood what they wanted to do, and I used my degree in killing bad guys to keep them safe. We facilitated such things as government permits in the country in question, logistics for the dig, and then provided security on site. Which is where my guns came into play.

Jennifer said, “Yeah, I get that, and you get that, but I’m not sure the IRS will understand. If they start to question, we’re in trouble.”

She had a point. The truth of the matter was our business was all a sham. We actually did real archeological facilitation, to a certain extent, but only to give us cover for what we really did—putting some national security threat’s head on a spike.

Since much of the unrecovered archeological stuff around the world was in what could charitably be called ungoverned space, meaning that it held a lot of bad guys, we leveraged my company to eliminate national security threats. Grolier allowed us to penetrate as eggheads instead of commandos wearing camo swooping in on helicopters, giving the United States plausible deniability for any fallout.

All of my “employees” were apex predators, drawn from the most elite units of the Department of Defense and the CIA, and most of our real work was directed by the National Command Authority of the United States. Which is to say, most of my business was paid by good ol’ Uncle Sam, under the rubric of something called Project Prometheus.

Our unit was so classified we never even utter the assigned code name, instead simply calling the umbrella organization the Taskforce, but being that deep in the black had its own problems—namely, paying our taxes like a real company, which is what Jennifer was trying to do. It sounds insane, but if some guy in the IRS started digging, he might find something we didn’t want him to. You’d think we could just tell him to back off and swagger back to the bar, but that wasn’t how it worked. We needed to be legit—even to our own government—and I’d given that task to Jennifer.

Jennifer said, “Yeah, I can plausibly claim the range time, but I can’t claim the guns. You buy them like candy. How am I going to sell that? The IRS is going to ask why you need so many—especially since we never take them with us. We always use Taskforce stuff.”

“They don’t know that. I mean, we need guns to do the job. That’s why I buy them.”

She squinted at me and said, “We might have more guns than the Taskforce itself. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe you thought they wore out after a single use. I mean, what’s up with the gun you’re going to shoot today? We have three long-range precision rifles, and you bought a fourth? How am I going to sell that?”

A little miffed, I said, “Technology marches forward. This is a precise tool. I need to see if it stands up to what they say it does. I’m not driving a Model T today either.”

“Right. You need to see if it works. Which is why you paid a bunch of money to some guy from your old unit to build it.”

“Hey, if he builds them better, and it works, he’ll be building the ones we use on operations. The Taskforce will buy them. I can’t help it if he knows what he’s doing.”

She scoffed and said, “I’ll claim the range fees, but I’m not claiming that new gun.”

Honestly, I didn’t care. We were making a pretty good living, as we had to do at least three honest trips for every one we did for the government, and I wasn’t looking to own a Porsche. I was happy where we were, the satisfaction of the job meaning more than the money. Well, that and I’d rather have a new precision rifle than a Porsche.

I said, “Okay, keep it off, but if you do, we’re leaving money on the table.”

Exasperated, Jennifer waved her hand and said, “Go shooting. It’ll be easier for me without you here.”

I smiled, hearing exactly what I wanted to. All I had to do was be obstinate for a little bit, and then she’d let me go. I leaned in and kissed her on the lips, saying, “You’re doing God’s work.”

She smacked me on the top of the head and said, “Yeah, yeah, right.”

Don't think I don't understand what just happened. If the IRS cracks us open, you'll be the one asking Wolffe for help. Not me."

George Wolffe was the commander of the Taskforce, and a good man. A paramilitary officer in the CIA, he'd been running and gunning his entire life, and he was one of the men who'd designed Project Prometheus when it was formed. Now he was in charge of the entire shooting match. If I needed to call in a chit because of some IRS audit, I'd do so, and he'd help, but I didn't think that was going to happen.

I grabbed my rifle case, wanting to get out of our office as quickly as possible before Jennifer changed her mind. I was six feet from the door when the computer dinged, sending a tone out that meant only one thing: the Taskforce was calling on our encrypted VPN.

Jennifer glanced at me, then clicked the protocols for encryption, saying, "What's this about?"

I set the rifle on the floor and went behind her in the chair, saying, "I have no idea. Nothing was on the horizon at the last update."

The screen went through its protocols and then cleared, George Wolffe's head staring back at me. I said, "Hey, sir, what's up with the call?"

He smiled and said, "Where's Amena right now?"

Amena was our adopted daughter, and the question told me he was going to hand us a mission. I said, "She's in Europe on a school trip. Italy. Why?"

"Because I need your little company right now. As in yesterday."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brad Taylor, Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.), is a twenty-one-year veteran of the U.S. Army Infantry and Special Forces, including eight years with the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment—Delta, popularly known as Delta Force. Taylor retired after serving more than two decades and participating in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as well as classified operations around the globe. His final military post was as assistant professor of military science at The Citadel. He is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eighteen Pike Logan thrillers and is a security consultant on asymmetric threats for various agencies. He lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with his wife and two daughters.