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A PENGUIN SPECIAL

BRAD TAYLOR



THE DIG

DUTTON
— est. 1852 —

★ A TASKFORCE STORY ★

Also by Brad Taylor

One Rough Man

All Necessary Force

Enemy of Mine

The Widow's Strike

The Polaris Protocol

Other Taskforce Stories

The Callsign

Gut Instinct

Black Flag

The Dig

A Taskforce Story, Featuring an Exclusive Excerpt from *Days of Rage*

Brad Taylor

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Dear Reader,

Pike and Jennifer's company, Grolier Recovery Services, was started with the seed money from the expedition to find the Mayan temple showcased in *One Rough Man*. I toyed with the idea of writing about that experience, since it happened off the page. In the end, I thought it would be more fun to explore Pike trying to convince Jennifer to start up the company in the first place, since that happened off the page as well. *The Dig* is that story, and it sits between *One Rough Man* and *All Necessary Force* in the Pike Logan universe. Hope you enjoy!

Best regards,

Brad Taylor

Chapter 1

I watched her hands absorb the recoil, checking for a flinch on the trigger, then focused downrange to the target. With the exception of one flyer, the rounds were all in the “A” zone. Dead center.

“I thought you said you hadn’t shot anything before?”

Jennifer lowered the 1911 and said, “No. I said I don’t *own* any guns. There’s a difference. I grew up in rural Texas with two older brothers. Yeah, I’ve shot before.”

That didn’t explain the capability I’d just seen. Jerking a trigger and making noise against a stump because you’d been a redneck was a hell of a lot different than punching the A zone at a distance of twenty-five feet. Repeatedly.

I said, “Who taught you to shoot? Not your brothers, I’ll bet.”

“My grandfather on my mom’s side. He was a Texas Ranger. You know what that is?”

She said it with a little pride. The first I’d heard whenever she’d spoken about her family.

I said, “Yeah. I know what that is.”

“It’s not an Airborne Ranger, if that’s what you’re thinking. The Texas Rangers have been around a hell of a lot longer, and my granddad is a legend.”

I took the gun from her hand, racking the slide and saying, “Legend as in he’s done some stupid shit that made the news, or legend in that he deserves some respect?”

Her mouth dropped open and, a second too late, I wanted my words back. I saw the damage on her face and felt like kicking myself. It was becoming a pattern between us—one that I was sure she wouldn’t tolerate for very long. I always forgot that she didn’t have the thick skin I did. Well, it was either that or I just said insulting things like I had Tourette’s.

I really didn’t want to. The words just came out.

I saw her mouth slam closed, her jaw muscles quivering, and said, “Whoa. Wait. Jennifer, I didn’t mean that the way you think . . .”

She started stalking to our car, the anger flowing out behind her in a vapor, and I understood exactly why. Her uncle—not the Texas Ranger, but still on her mother’s side—had traveled to Guatemala to find a lost Mayan temple. Following some incredibly stupid theory, he’d done it illegally, using some unintentional drug cartel help. I’d ended up getting roped into trying to rescue him, and he’d ended up getting killed by the cartels. The whole thing was a fiasco, with the exception of meeting Jennifer. In this case, my comment about the Ranger sounded like I was making fun of her dead uncle.

Watching her walk away, a part of me—cold and reptilian—could care less what she thought. That part was a sack of vipers, full of pride and arrogance. Something that would revel in me lying in a shallow grave, proud of proving I was the better man even as I strangled on the roots growing underneath the headstones.

Another part realized that what she thought about me was the difference between living and dying

And that little piece had held sway ever since I'd looked in a mirror in a Guatemalan hotel, not liking the septic shell of the man who had stared back.

Thank God.

I stared at the pistol, then the target, like either would help temper my asinine comment. I said, "Jennifer, wait . . ."

She ignored me.

I slapped in a fresh magazine, racked the slide, and ripped off seven rounds, punching the A zone around her strikes, my group infinitely smaller than hers. And fired infinitely faster, sounding like a slow-cycling automatic weapon. The noise caused her to jump and stop walking. I pointed at my rounds.

"That's where you need to be. I'm impressed with your shooting. I really am, but you need to get better. Much, much better, if you want to pass A-and-S."

She crossed her arms on her chest, staring at me without a word. I blinked first, glancing down from her gaze and fiddling with the Springfield 1911 in my hand. She said, "I'm not so sure I want to do that anyway. If it means working with jackasses like you."

I whipped my head up at that comment, shocked it had come out of her mouth. Jennifer was the type of person who never said a cross word about anyone. Ever. Even when they deserved it. Waitress treat you like a mushroom? Probably because she's preoccupied with her special needs child at home. Driver cut you off? Maybe because he's rushing his pregnant wife to the hospital.

She'd snapped at me before, but had never called me names. The fact that she had now meant I'd finally crossed a line, entering a no-man's land way, way south of the Friend Zone. The thought scared the hell out of me.

She had a tiny smirk on her face, and I felt the relief like a reserve parachute blossoming above my head. She had seen the fear, and that had been worth more than the apology. She said, "You know, it takes more than fancy shooting."

I grinned and said, "What does?"

"Impressing me."

I holstered the pistol and said, "Impressing you isn't the issue. You need to impress the Taskforce and that's going to be a very tough thing to do."

Once upon a time, I'd been a true-blue counterterrorist commando in an organization so secret it didn't have an official name. A unit that made us all feel like we were barrel-chested freedom fighters keeping America safe from the bad men stalking the earth. Most probably still felt that way.

I knew better.

I'd had a run-in with destiny, a horrific event involving my family, and it had crushed me. I had been well on my way to self-imposed suicide—death by cop or anyone else with a gun—when I'd crossed paths with Jennifer. She'd pulled me out of the abyss, scabbing over the loss of my wife and child without even meaning to. In return for that favor, I was trying to convince the command of my old unit to allow her to try out—without even telling her initially.

It was selfish of me. I understood that. I wanted back into the Taskforce embrace, but I didn't want to lose Jennifer. We'd found the temple in Guatemala, and I'd convinced Jennifer to start a company with the proceeds. She could finish her degree in anthropology, and I could start kicking terrorist ass around the world with my new cover company. A dream world like the ending of the movie *True Lies*. Well, maybe not that good, but the company was pretty close.

Ostensibly designed to help anyone who wanted to conduct archaeological work around the world, we were a one-stop shop for old shit. We could schmooze host-country governments for the overall

effort or provide security for an individual dig, all the while helping the United States preempt terrorist actions in denied areas. Perfect cover in my mind, but less than perfect in others—especially when Jennifer was brought into the mix.

Kurt Hale, the commander of the Taskforce, had tentatively agreed to allow us to start the company, and we even had a name—Grolier Recovery Services—but I had more in mind. I wanted to operate like I had in the past. And I wanted Jennifer to do the same, which was unorthodox, to say the least. After all, she was a civilian. And a female.

Jennifer walked back to the shooting line, sizing me up. Basically, shutting me down. She said, “I could give a flip what the Taskforce thinks about me. I am who I am. Take it or leave it.”

Here we go.

The Taskforce was a he-man, women-hating organization like no other. You hear about Wall Street in the '80s or NFL football teams, but none held a candle to a bunch of operators who'd spent their lives in a Darwinian arena where getting to the top of a career field didn't mean risking bankruptcy or free agency, but death. There was *no* comparison.

We were the perfect gentlemen with our families, but definitely Neanderthal in our perceptions of the fairer sex when it came to the job. Getting Jennifer into Assessment and Selection was a hurdle in and of itself. Getting her through it would be damn near impossible. I knew this because I would have been the first person who would have cut the legs out from underneath her.

Before she'd saved my life, that is.

I said, “Jennifer, I know I'm walking on thin ice, but please understand that nobody in my world wants you to succeed. *Nobody*. They hate the idea of you as an operator because of your gender alone. You need to be better than they were at A-and-S. Better than a man. Better than *me*.”

I handed her the pistol. She took it, shaking her head. She said, “There's no way I can be better than you guys. I've seen you and Knuckles. You've had years of training. I can't duplicate that in a few months. I don't think I could ever reach that level.”

I said, “Yes. Yes, you can. I'm not training you as a door kicker. You have your own unique skills to contribute. You have a talent few possess. I've seen it.”

Fiddling with the Springfield, she looked up at that comment. “What talent?”

“I can't explain it. Look, you're right. You can't be better than me or Knuckles on an operation, but A-and-S isn't an operation. It's a selection course. It's full of false shit and skills tests. You can beat it. I *know* you can beat it. The course is designed to be about seventy percent mental and thirty percent skills. I can give you the skills, and you have the mental ability already. I *know* it. You make decisions that are correct. That's more important than the physical side.”

She placed a magazine in the well, then racked the slide. She said, “Why do you care so much about what they think of me? Does their opinion alter yours?”

I wasn't sure how to answer that. At the end of the day, Jennifer was a college student. A much older student than most, but a college student nonetheless. A life lived in an academic environment protected from the real tragedy that occurs on the world stage. Our little detour to Guatemala for her uncle had pulled her from her cloistered college world and plunged her into a hammer-jack of firefights and feral violence. She'd done very, very well, showing real skill. But even then, I would be lying if I said I didn't trust the opinion of a group of men I'd been under fire with.

I punted, saying, “What they think only matters to get what I want. No more.”

She took a two-handed grip and sighted down the barrel, her hands and stance looking okay to the uninitiated, but woefully pathetic to me.

I said, “Stop. Here's where we begin.”

And we started shooting for real.

Chapter 2

The drive from the makeshift range inside Francis Marion National Forest back to our office in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina took close to forty minutes. We spent the time with small banter. I tried to stick with the shooting, but she kept bringing the questions around to what to expect at Assessment and Selection. I gave vague answers, which annoyed the hell out of her.

As the name implied, Selection was all about figuring out who was or was not a good fit for our little top-secret organization. There were plenty of physical skills that I was more than willing to help Jennifer hone, but at the end of the day, as I'd told her, it was mental. Giving away the secrets of what to expect would only taint the entire experiment. She needed to go into it cold, just like every male before her had. The minute anyone thought I'd given her an "answer key," she'd be dismissed out of hand.

Not that she wasn't going to get dismissed anyway.

Getting her a shot at A&S was proving damn near impossible. I hadn't told Jennifer, because I didn't want her to lose what little enthusiasm she had for the training, but so far it was being roundly dismissed. Since she had no military or intelligence experience, the entire notion was being treated as ridiculous. With all the fighting to get her in, her failing never crossed my mind. Neither did her reluctance to attempt it in the first place.

We pulled into our brand-new office on Shem Creek, a marsh-front, townhouse-looking building that we leased for a song due to the depressed real estate economy in Charleston. Apparently, the previous tenant was some bank/brokerage/investment firm that had packed up its bags in the middle of the night and fled, leaving a healthy mortgage that had to be paid by the landlord.

Jennifer questioned whether our little company even needed an office, but I was adamant. An office meant we were real. More than just a handshake between us. Much harder to sever ties—which was something I greatly feared she would do. Besides, it was right down the street from a couple of great creek-front bar and grills.

I parked out front and let Jennifer get the door while I secured the firearms. By the time I'd gotten inside, she was on our little desktop computer, reading an e-mail with a look of wonder on her face.

We hadn't gotten around to renting a full-on office suite, so we shared the single desk, the rest of the room open with a scratched hardwood floor and a single vinyl chair in the corner, left over from the previous tenants.

I opened a closet door and pulled out a weapons cleaning kit, the pungent smell of Hoppe's No. 9 solvent filling the room. I sat in the cracked vinyl La-Z-Boy, small bits of stuffing coming out, and broke down the 1911, saying, "What's up?"

Still reading, she said, "It's from my brother. He got us a job."

"Job? What are you talking about?"

"Remember I told you about my brother? The reporter in Dallas? He did some story on UFOs in

Roswell, New Mexico, and while he was there he ran across a guy in the preservation society. Apparently, there's a site the guy believes contains Indian artifacts near the banks of a stream off the Pecos River. The owner of the land is about to build a dam there, burying the site underwater."

She looked at me as if that mattered, then scrunched her eyes when I apparently missed the glaringly obvious point.

I said, "And? So what?"

"Really? And they need someone to prove it's an actual archaeological site. My brother told him about us locating the temple, and the guy subsequently found that article in the *Smithsonian* magazine about our trip. He wants to hire us to consult on the site so he can get a court order to stop the dam."

"Why us? He's in a preservation club, right? Surely he does this all the time."

She scowled, not liking the logic of my words. Enamored of the thought of getting to dig around some old pottery shards, she was willing to ignore the obvious.

She said, "I don't know. Maybe he wants an outsider. Maybe he's already exhausted his internal ability. What difference does it make? He's willing to pay us."

"Jennifer, we don't have time for this. You've got about three months before Selection, and we need every second of it."

She said nothing for a minute, then popped a hole in my balloon. "Pike, I heard you talking to Kurt. I know you want this really badly, but they're never going to let me go. You need to face that."

As the commander, Kurt Hale was ultimately the person who would give her the green light to attend. He'd called yesterday to find out how our company was coming along, wanting to start seeding it with "employees" from the Taskforce, and I'd immediately begun needling him about Jennifer and A&S. He'd blown up, telling me in no uncertain terms she wasn't going. Period. I hadn't realized Jennifer had heard.

I said, "That's just him talking. I'll get him to agree, and when he does, you need to be ready. He's not going to wait. We don't have the time to waste going to New Mexico."

"Pike, it won't take long. All we need to do is confirm or deny the presence of an indigenous civilization, then write a report. He'll do the rest. Just let me give him a call and figure out the left and right limits."

Knowing I was going to lose, I said, "We go, and you still have to train in the evenings. Okay?"

She gazed at the ceiling as if praying for patience. She said, "Let me call first. It might all be a moot point."

* * *

A. J. Sweetwater hung up the phone and said, "They've agreed to come."

The man he knew as Chris said, "And will they be able to stop the dam?"

A.J. hoisted his jeans up over his hips and said, "They can slow it down. Long enough for you to do what you want."

"That's sounds suspiciously like what you said originally. When I paid you the first time. Your word alone, as the president of the Historical and Preservation Society, would cause a pause in the work. That didn't happen. Now you want me to pay more money."

Sweetwater heard a veiled threat and wondered if Chris was lying to him about why he wanted the dam stopped. Claiming to be a member of one of the many nutty UFO groups that clung to Roswell like a bad rash, he'd stated there was evidence of an alien crash on the rancher's land and his group wanted to find it. But he acted like none of the alien groupies that Sweetwater had met in the past.

Slightly off-kilter folks, wearing clothes out of date and always talking about the latest theory on the Roswell incident so long ago, they could be spotted from across the street. Not so with Chris. No, wearing what looked like expensive clothing for a safari, Chris rarely said a word and had a cloud of menace about him.

Sweetwater said, "I've never had a rancher say no to me in the past. Most everyone lets us at least explore for Native American artifacts. We bring in these experts and we'll have official paperwork backing up our claim."

"Why them? Why not someone from here? Aren't there government agencies that do this?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think you wanted any government types involved. On top of that, we need someone from out of town. The stuff I planted will fool an outsider, but someone who makes a living looking at New Mexico archeology will know it's not kosher. I can call them off if you want."

"No. No government. When will they get here?"

"They said they'd fly in today, so I can see them tomorrow morning."

"Okay. I'll pay for their services, but they'd better slow down the process. My people need some time to search. If this doesn't work, you'd better learn to scuba dive."

Sweetwater smiled at the joke, the grin sliding off his face at the absolute lack of humor on Chris's face.

Chapter 3

Jennifer tried one more time to break Pike out of his foul mood, but he was having none of it. He'd climbed behind the wheel of their rented pickup full of gear, and let her ride shotgun as the sole conversationalist with Mr. A. J. Sweetwater in his own Ford F-150.

An affable farmer-looking guy with a wispy mustache and a pronounced Adam's apple, Sweetwater was dressed like everyone else she'd seen in Roswell—blue jeans, leather belt, plaid shirt, and straw cowboy hat. He didn't seem like he had a doctorate in American history, but that's what he claimed.

Pike had been grouchy since they'd woken up this morning. She'd walked down the hall and knocked on his door, the cheap hotel varnish doing nothing to add weight to the seriousness she felt about their mission. He'd answered buttoning his shirt, noticeably having not shaved. She knew he'd done it because it aggravated her. He'd been trying to push her buttons since they'd flown out from Charleston the day before.

They'd gone down to the free breakfast and Pike's attitude had grown worse.

"This is the breakfast? Some bananas with black spots and a box of doughnuts? *I* should have found the hotel."

Now getting a little piqued, she said, "This is what Mr. Sweetwater recommended. I didn't think you tough guys cared where you stayed."

"Yeah, well, I don't like paying for bed bugs. I should have moved us last night when we saw the place."

"You couldn't. This is where they're shipping the ground-penetrating radar."

He'd said, "Ground-penetrating what?"

"Pike, it's an archaeological dig. I can't just look at the dirt. We need to see if there's anything under the ground. Walls, wells, graves, that sort of thing."

"Who's paying for this shit?"

She told him. And that's when he'd really become grumpy.

Jennifer, riding with Sweetwater, made sure their pickup with Pike at the wheel was still behind them, then turned back around to the front just as Sweetwater took a left turn off Highway 2, heading east on a dirt road, bouncing along and leaving a dust cloud like a mini-tornado in their wake. She said, "How much farther?"

Sweetwater said, "'Bout ten minutes, give or take. How long will it take to get this done?"

"Depends on the size of the plot. From what you said, we should be able to finish in a day. I did my research on the flight over, reading through the archives from the Office of Archaeological Studies at the Museum of New Mexico, so I'm up to speed on what to expect."

Sweetwater looked a little queasy at the statement, something Jennifer tucked away for no good reason. Just a tidbit that was worth filing in her subconscious. She continued, "As a matter of fact,

they've done quite a few surveys around here, locating sites from both the Ceramic and Archaic periods. Why didn't you just have them do the investigation? It was no trouble getting them on the phone, and they seemed a little surprised that you'd brought us in."

Sweetwater looked downright nauseous at her words. He fumbled a little with the radio dial, trying to get something to come in, then said, "Well, that's mighty big of them to say that now. All I care about is preventing the loss of indigenous artifacts, like an Apache migratory campsite or some other settlement. When I talked to them, they said they'd put it in the queue for survey, but that wasn't going to work with the dam being built."

Jennifer took Sweetwater's words at face value, catching Pike's visage behind the wheel in the side mirror, all venom and disgust at the entire effort, bouncing along behind them and eating all the dust. She focused back to the front, smothering a smile.

She'd spent a great amount of time trying to figure out what made him tick, and had given up. Whenever she thought he was intolerant or chauvinistic, he would end up surprising her, showing a softness that was completely out of character.

He could be more trying than any man she'd ever met, but she held the edge and she knew it. Pike could threaten all day long, but there was a connection with him that was real. She knew, beyond the grumpiness, no matter what she did, he liked her. Which was a high school way of saying he had a crush on her, and also pretty much summed up their relationship. A sort of twisted juvenile bond between grown adults. A stagnant level she tolerated because his ability to connect had been short-circuited by the loss of his family. Pike might be capable of killing men with a soda straw, but he had no skills operating in her world, and it was so easy to twist him about, something she enjoyed. Up to a point.

Pike had once saved her life at great risk to his own, with nothing for a reward other than the fact that she'd lived, and she would never forget that. He could stomp and scream all he wanted, with her tweaking him at will, but at the end of the day she would do what he asked. And he would do the same in return.

But it *was* fun tweaking him.

They bounced over a set of cattle guards and Jennifer saw the line of foliage marking the Pecos River off on the horizon, a small tributary from it snaking out in the desert scrub-oak toward them. Sweetwater pulled the truck up short and she saw construction in the distance, a bucket-loader with piles of sand next to it.

The dam.

Sweetwater said, "Well, this is it. You see the tractor up there? That's the head of the dam. From there to here I've found some artifacts, but I'm not sure if they've just been washed out by the river, or if this is really a settlement worthy of excavation. As you know, the river has probably moved two hundred feet in the last hundred years, so what I need is your official call on whether we can get an injunction on that dam. He gets it built, and whatever is here disappears."

Having stopped behind them, Pike came up in time to hear the end of the conversation. He said, "Who owns the land? They know we're here?"

"Yeah, they do. They're continuing to build, but told us we can search as long as we want. Well, as long as we can, I guess."

Jennifer exited the vehicle and saw Pike scowl about something. She glanced back and caught Mr. Proper Farmer Sweetwater gazing at her bottom as she stepped down. Which would be enough for Pike to start cracking heads just to let off some steam. He had no tolerance for anyone treating her as anything less than a scientist. Sweetwater caught the glare and quickly wandered down the stream

bank, staring at the ground.

She quickly opened the tailgate and said, "Give me a hand with the GPR."

Pike said, "Yeah, great. Three thousand dollars against a profit of two thousand. Sure. Let me help you with that."

He leaned in and grabbed the outside edge of the cradle for the ground-penetrating radar, an all-terrain chassis that looked like a shell for a lawn-mower engine, only with larger wheels.

She saw his aggravation building and decided she'd had about enough. It was time to curb his little tantrum, and she knew she could. She brushed up against him and said, "Hey, I found a gym near our hotel. I told you I'd work while we're here. We can't shoot, but we can do the grappling stuff. Right?"

He jerked the chassis to the ground and stood up, wiping his brow. Glaring at her. She said, "Okay, stop the crybaby crap." Well, she said that on the inside, anyway. Outside she leaned into the bed of the truck and pulled the GPR unit toward him, waiting.

She felt him slide in next to her, grasping the outside edge of the GPR, their bodies touching, and she knew she'd won. But she didn't dare show anything.

He said, "All right. You want to find a bunch of old pottery shards, I guess I can waste a few hours. But you'll pay it back on the mat."

She looked at him and saw the same unshaven, gruff growl. She elbowed his short ribs and he jerked away, grinning. And just like that, they were back on an even keel.

Jennifer heard Dr. Sweetwater shout something and left the GPR setup to Pike, running over to see what he'd found.

He said, "See! Right here! There are artifacts on the edge of the stream. Out in the open. This was a settlement."

He held up what looked like an arrowhead, and she bent down, picking up some pieces that may or may not be ceramic shards. She gently set them aside and said, "Well, maybe, maybe not. This is a floodplain, after all."

Sweetwater scowled and said, "This should be enough for further exploration. Write it up."

She said, "I will. After I sector the land with the GPR."

Pike came over dragging the lawnmower device, the GPR now settled inside. Sweetwater said, "Okay, okay. We'll talk to you at, say, nine A.M. tomorrow?"

Jennifer said, "Sounds good."

By the time he'd driven away, Pike was grumbling about the terrain, pushing the ground-penetrating radar over the rocks, manhandling it every fifty seconds.

She caught up to him and said, "Hey, something strange is going on here."

He jerked the GPR forward, saying, "You mean besides me just running this thing back and forth without knowing what I'm looking at?"

She grinned at him and said, "You don't even have it calibrated."

He stopped and wiped his brow again, grinning back. "Okay, smart-ass. What's so damn strange?"

"Sweetwater led me right to a couple of artifacts, but they're completely out of time with each other. There's no way both are sitting at ground level."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they're both old as all get-out, but way, way out of time. It's like someone from a thousand years in the future found a stone axe and a microwave oven. They don't match."

"So what are you saying?"

She fiddled with the keyboard of the GPR, going through the sequence to get it calibrated for the terrain they were on. She said, "I'm not saying anything yet. They *could* have been exposed by

flooding here in the riverbank, and not tied to each other. Let's get a grid search with the GPR. We don't find anything with it, and we can write this off."

Pike started pushing, muttering, "You mean write this off as a tax loss?"

She gave him a hip check, and he smiled. Telling her he was okay with the entire trip.

They had traversed about two-thirds of the available terrain, finding nothing, when Jennifer said, "Whoa. Stop right there."

"What?"

"There's something here."

She bent down and stuck a little flag in the ground, saying, "I don't know what it is, but it's only about a foot down. Since it's in the floodplain, it might be an old log. But it also might be the remain of a pueblo wall."

When she heard nothing, she looked up, seeing Pike gazing into the distance.

"What?"

"Someone's coming. From the other side of the creek."

She looked up and saw a dust cloud approaching at a high rate of speed. A four-by-four slid to a stop opposite them. A man wearing one of those ubiquitous straw hats and sporting a full mustache exited. With a shotgun.

Pike immediately went into combat mode, pushing Jennifer behind him and getting ready to fight. The man stormed across the creek, heedless of the ankle-deep water. He never brought the gun to bear but the threat was there nonetheless.

He said, "What the fuck are you two doing on my land?"

Chapter 4

Rudy Chamfer watched the truck bounce away across the scrub, headed to Highway 2. He pulled out his phone. He waited for it to connect, wondering if he should have called while they were still under his control. A man answered.

“Hey, I just chased off two people searching the riverbank.”

“Did they find anything?”

“Not that I could see. They had some contraption and was running it about, but they didn’t seem to have any focus.”

“So there’s nothing to stop the dam?”

“Not as far as I know, but I’m not a scientist. I don’t know what they have.”

The man cursed in the phone, and Rudy saw his cattle lease going up in pottery shards and government red tape. He said, “I’ll get it built. Don’t back out on me now.”

The man said, “I can find plenty of leases to graze my cattle. You’re the one that said you could provide water. I don’t have a lot of time to wait. I have to put them somewhere.”

“I hear you. Don’t worry. The dam will be built in time. I’m on schedule.”

“Who were they?”

“A company from Charleston, South Carolina. Some archaeological firm called Grolier Recovery Services. They claim that they had permission to explore.”

“Really? How would they have permission?”

“They don’t, dammit. Someone told them they did.”

“You know where they’re staying?”

“Yeah. They gave me all their information. They wanted to clear up what they thought was a misunderstanding.”

“Where is it?”

I spent the rest of the ride back into Roswell in a fine stew, refusing to talk. This whole endeavor was ridiculous. I was sweating out in the middle of the New Mexico desert, pushing a lawn mower on steroids, only to get confronted by a guy and a shotgun. I couldn’t believe the damn junior varsity bullshit. Sweetwater hadn’t even gotten permission to check out the guy’s land.

Jennifer tried to mollify me, saying, “Hey, we found something. At the end of the day, even with the sorry coordination, we need to check that out. We can’t let it get flooded.”

I said, “I could give a shit about that. What I really want to do is punch Sweetwater in the face.”

We connected with Highway 285 and entered downtown Roswell. Once again in the land of fruits and nuts, the drab surroundings doing nothing for my mood.

We passed the vaunted, world-renowned UFO museum, looking like a snake-show on a dirt highway in Florida, and Jennifer said, “Pike, you need to come to grips with the fact that a lot of our work won’t be commando missions. It’s a slow, hard, dirty toil. The payback is the site itself.”

I said nothing. She continued. “You said if I started this business with you that fifty percent would be real scientific work. You said we needed to prove our cover in order to use the cover. This is just that fifty percent.”

I pulled into our hotel and she said, “Okay. Look. Let’s get to the gym. You can show me some commando stuff and then sleep in tomorrow. I’ll handle Sweetwater. I’d rather you didn’t come to the meeting.”

I put the truck in park and said, “All right. I’m okay with that. But you’d better put your game face on. I’m a little aggravated.”

Thirty minutes later we were rolling around on the mat at a local gym just off Main Street. It was privately owned in a crumbling, cement cinder-block building, but I’ll be damned if it wasn’t pretty good, with a complete assortment of free weights, cardio, and Cro-Magnon CrossFit gear. We found a corner in a yoga room that wasn’t in use and I went to work, teaching Jennifer the finer arts of kicking someone’s ass.

I played to her strengths, stressing to her that her sole function in a fight was to do enough damage to get away. Never, ever to try to go toe-to-toe with another man—especially a man out to get her. She didn’t have the strength to do so, but she sure as hell had the flexibility and the quickness to escape, something I began to focus on.

We went through a few drills of rapid strikes, techniques that should, if executed correctly, allow her to break contact. Once she had the confidence, I went in harder, bringing her to the ground to see what she would do. I got on top of her and she went into the guard, cinching her legs around my waist and attempting to wrap up my arms. Just like I’d taught her. Only this time the position broke my concentration, the closeness of her body distracting me.

She swam out of my grip and flipped me over, ending up on top, and giving me a couple of pulled jabs to my head, her face glowing at the success.

I said, “Damn it. You need to get up. Get away. Don’t continue the fight on the ground. Pound the guy like you did, but don’t maintain the position unless he’s out of the fight.”

She said, “I could have pounded you. I chose not to.”

She was gazing down at me, a lock of hair out of her ponytail, sweat between her breasts, a grin on her face. I became distinctly uncomfortable. “Okay. Let me up. Let’s go again.”

“Let you up? No way.”

I wrapped my own legs around her waist, grabbed her arm and drew it out, then flipped her, trapping her elbow in an arm-bar. I stretched out and she tapped, shouting in pain. I let go and she rolled away, punching me in the shoulder.

“You asshole! You never know when to quit.”

She stood up and stomped away. I felt my face flush, wondering if she knew why I’d done it. Wondering if she knew my weakness with her. I said, “Jennifer . . .”

She said, “I’m done. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. I’ll take a cab to the hotel.”

She left the yoga room and I felt like an ass. Like I always did whenever we got anywhere outside the range of just business partners. I punched the mat with my fist and heard, “You trying to hurt that thing?”

I looked up and saw two men, both in jeans and T-shirts, both in good shape. One was bulky, withropy muscles and veins standing out, his shirt a size too small. The other was tall and lanky. I stood, saying nothing. I wiped my head with a towel and walked to the exit. The bulky one blocked it, saying “You the scientist doing the dig out south?”

I paused, reassessing. I said, “Yeah. As a matter of fact I am.”

He said, "Well, we'd like it if you just went back to Charleston. Head on home. There's nothing to be found out there."

"If that's the case, then you won't mind us looking. We're getting paid, and I need to show something for the effort."

He said, "Money isn't worth it. Trust me."

The other man circled to my left, closing the door to the room. I reassessed again, elevating my awareness. Preparing.

I said, "Okay. You got it. I'll get out of here. I don't like this damn place anyway."

The lanky one said, "Unfortunately, we need to make sure of that. You understand. A small lesson for you and your little girlfriend. Just a taste of what to expect if you don't leave well enough alone."

The words slammed into me like a frontal punch. If they had two on me, they had someone on her. *As I sit here.* I gave up all pretense of defusing the situation, saying, "Get out of my way, right fucking now."

They looked at each other, a small smirk going between them. They had no idea of the shitstorm they had entered. They fully expected to tap me on the head a couple of times just to see me roll over crying, and I might have even let them do that, given the circumstances, but they'd made the mistake of threatening Jennifer.

So it was too late. I fully intended to crush them with more violence than they'd ever seen. And I knew my intentions would bear fruit.

I skipped forward and lanky man looked away in a juvenile attempt at a fake, then threw a wild right cross at my face. I raised my left arm, forming a triangle against my head in order to protect it. I took the brunt of the blow and immediately wrapped my left arm around Lanky's right, trapping his elbow. I brought my right arm underneath his elbow and wrenched against the joint with great force, causing Lanky's elbow to splinter upwards, against the direction it was intended to go. Before the damage had even registered in his brain, I dropped down and swept his legs out from under him, causing him to crash straight down on his back.

From the ground I immediately lashed out with my right leg into the knee supporting the weight of the muscle-man, doing the same thing with his joint that I had done with Lanky's elbow. It gave with a crack and a subsequent scream from him as he hit the ground, writhing in pain.

I sprang to my feet, but the fight was over. It had lasted about three seconds. Lanky was shrieking with the keening wail of a wounded rabbit, looking dumbfounded at his destroyed joint and waving it around like a macabre pom-pom, his splintered arm looking like something from a Photoshop trick, the elbow backwards. Muscle-head was rolling around on the ground as well, holding his shattered leg like Joe Thiesmann. I stalked toward him and he screeched at me, the sweat from the pain rolling off his head. I cut off the yell with a roundhouse kick to his skull, knocking him out as if he'd been hit in the forehead with a ball-peen hammer. Lanky was now all wide eyes and fear. I said, "Give me your fucking wallet."

He frantically used his good arm to dig it out, tossing it to the mat. I picked it up, put it in my pocket, then grabbed his hair with my left hand. I said, "If you've hurt Jennifer, I'll be back to kill the both of you."

He started to say something and I hammered him right above the lip, feeling his nose shatter. He flopped over unconscious.

I ran out of the yoga room, jogging to the exit, people staring as I passed by. I entered the parking lot and saw Jennifer on the ground, a man on top of her, his hand tangled in her hair, his other popping her face. I started sprinting and she flipped him just like she had done me, using her flexibility to

swim against his hold until she was on top. She wasted no time pounding his head into the pavement, her fists driving through his skull as if she was trying to punch the ground. I reached the fight and saw he was gone. On the verge of being permanently damaged. I grabbed her arm. She whipped around, a feral and savage and I jumped back. She recognized me and quit fighting.

I hoisted her to her feet and said, "Come on. Let's get the hell out of here."

We ran to our pickup. I fired it up, squealing out of the parking lot. Once in the city I said, "I thought I told you to run. Not continue fighting."

She was still breathing heavily, the adrenaline coursing through her. She said, "I was afraid to give him the chance to get back on me. I'm not sure your advice was the best."

I glanced at her and grinned. I squeezed her hand and said, "I'm not so sure it was very smart either. I told you you could think on your feet."

Chapter 5

Jennifer woke up the following morning, finding a note from Pike on the carpet by her door. She read it and sat down, holding it vacantly in her hand.

Did some research. Going to check something out. Don't meet Sweetwater until I get back.

She glanced at the clock. 0915. She dialed Pike's number. The phone rang, then went to voice mail.

What is he up to?

Last night they'd come back to the hotel long enough to check out, then had traveled south to a much seedier place than the one they'd been in before. The motel made no pretense of having anything like a free breakfast and Pike had paid with cash. All he was concerned about was whether it had free WiFi.

Pike had been all business, running through his head what the attack had meant, positive it had something to do with their dig. She thought that was crazy, just as sure that it had been a random mugging. He'd claimed that the men who had assaulted him had mentioned the site survey, but her assailant had just attacked.

She knew his past. Knew his secret world where nothing was what it seemed. She wondered if he *wanted* it to be something sinister. Wanted the mundane site survey to become an event that needed his skills.

She'd demanded they go to the police and report the attacks, but he had refused, causing an argument like those they'd had when they were back in Guatemala. Back searching for her uncle, when life and death were on the line and he hadn't listened to a damn thing she had said. Infuriating her with his superior know-it-all air. He'd appeared to come a long way since then, but tonight had proved that a sham.

The last she'd seen of him was when she'd slammed her hotel door in his face, angry beyond words at his stubbornness. In truth, she should have gone to the police by herself, but she hadn't. She was furious, but not to the point that she would deliberately go behind his back. Not yet.

And now he was out playing private eye.

Her phone rang and she snatched it up, hoping it was Pike. It wasn't. She didn't recognize the number, but identified his voice right away. *Sweetwater.*

He said, "Hey, where are you guys? I thought we were going to meet at nine? Here in my office?"

She said nothing, thinking about what Pike had said in his note about not going alone to meet Sweetwater. Then thinking about why they'd flown out here in the first place. She heard, "Hello? Anyone there?"

She said, "Hey. Sorry. Pike's not here and he has our rental truck. We did find something

yesterday, but we got run off by the owner of the land. I thought you said this was coordinated.”

“You found something? For real? Out at the site? What?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, we were run off before we could excavate it.”

“You going to write that up? Let me take it forward?”

“Not until I know what it is. It could have just been a buried log.”

“Well, when will you do that? I thought you said this would take a single day.”

“Hey, I just told you we got run off by a guy with a shotgun. Don’t blame us for your shoddy coordination.”

She heard nothing for a moment, the silence stretching out until it was her turn to say, “Hello?”

He said, “Yeah, I’m still here. Sorry about the rancher. I don’t know what happened. Must have just been a mistake. Is that excavation the last thing you need to do before writing your report?”

“Pretty much. We only had a little bit left to cover. If we had found something it would have settled the issue. The land would be worth protecting from the dam.”

“Well, can you go do it now?”

“I don’t have a vehicle.”

“I’ll come get you if you want. I can help. I’ve done these sorts of things before in my job with the Historical and Preservation Society.”

She thought one last time about Pike’s admonishment, then made her decision.

“Yeah, come get me.”

They were ten minutes out from the excavation site, still riding southeast on Highway 2, when Sweetwater’s phone rang. Sitting in the passenger seat, Jennifer only caught half the conversation, but it was enough to raise her interest.

—Hey, Chris. What’s up?

—No, they didn’t finish . . . Wait, wait. There’s good news. They found something.

—I don’t know. We’re headed back out there right now to check it out.

—Maybe twenty minutes.

Sweetwater looked at her, said, “Yes . . . yes,” then hung up.

She said, “Who was that?”

They pulled up to the cattle guard that led to the rancher’s land. Sweetwater put the truck in park and said, “I think we should stay out here this time. Walk to the site from the road.”

Jennifer said, “Why? If it was just a mistake?”

“It was a mistake, but I haven’t had time to correct it. Better not to have the truck raise a dust cloud.”

He opened the door and she said, “You didn’t answer my question. Who was on the phone?”

“A guy that’s interested in seeing what’s out here. A member of the preservation society.”

She exited and loaded her arms with paintbrushes and chicken-wire makeshift sieves, leaving the shovels to him. She said, “It sounded like he was yelling at you.”

Trudging toward the dig site, she saw Sweetwater’s face flush. Just a small bit of red and a sliding of the eyes that made her wonder what he was hiding.

Made her wonder if she should have heeded Pike’s warning.

Chapter 6

I watched the convoy of trucks enter through the gates and got an idea. Not the smartest one, but an idea nonetheless. Actually, outside of an Indiana Jones movie, the odds of it working were pretty much nil, but there was no other way to get closer, and I'd seen everything I could from outside the perimeter. It wasn't like they were going to shoot me if I got caught.

I hope.

Before something like that happened, I would at least like the chance to make up with Jennifer. Last night hadn't been exactly pleasant. She'd wanted to report our attack immediately to the police, but given the threat the men had said to me in the gym, I wanted to find out what the hell was going on, and the police would do nothing to break that down. Instead, we'd simply get tied up with some Barney Fife who wanted to know what we'd done to provoke the attack.

We'd had it out and she'd ended up slamming her door in my face. Pretty much like I was back in Guatemala chasing after her uncle.

I'd stomped off to my room and, using the wallet I'd taken off the lanky man, I'd started drilling down on the Internet to find out who our attackers were. I'd found lanky-boy on LinkedIn and it turned out that he worked for a security firm called Blackhorse Tactical. He was ex-military, but I couldn't get to his records to see what he'd done. The company website showed the usual outlay of such firms: flat range tactical firearms instruction, close quarters battle courses for law enforcement and military protective services, and an assortment of other training venues.

So I had the company he worked for, but no real linkage as to whether that was just a coincidence or actually tied to what had happened in the gym. Since the company was based out of North Carolina, on the surface it looked like coincidence. The guy was an independent contractor, so maybe he lived in Roswell in between jobs. Maybe.

I didn't buy that, though. Jennifer was convinced I was forcing something so I could go play commando, but it was just the opposite: Playing commando for years had given me a sixth sense about these types of events. I had a skill at sniffing out bad things. And this positively stank.

Since I was at a dead end, I'd called the Taskforce, telling the intel weenie who answered to figure out if there was any connection. Within minutes, I'd gotten a call back from Kurt Hale, wanting to know what I was doing freelancing his intelligence cell. I laid out what I had and I'll be damned if he didn't side with Jennifer, saying I was seeing ghosts that didn't exist.

I'd gotten aggravated, saying, "Sir, just tell me if Blackhorse has any contracts in Roswell. I can't find that out, but you can. If it's nothing, it's nothing."

He said, "Is this something to do with Jennifer? Are you trying to build up her resume with some contrived shit?"

That really poked a sore spot. "Sir, I don't have to build up her resume, damn it. You let her have a slot at Selection and she'd show you that."

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