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**BRAD
TAYLOR**

**THE
HONEYMOON
HEIST**

A PIKE LOGAN SHORT STORY

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**BRAD
TAYLOR**

**THE
HONEYMOON
HEIST**

A PIKE LOGAN NOVELLA

**WITNESS
IMPULSE**

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An Excerpt from Dead Man's Hand

Laurinburg Airfield, North Carolina

About the Author

Also by Brad Taylor

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Author's Note

I don't really get a chance when writing my novels to explore the various characters in as much depth as I'd like—because the novels themselves have a trajectory all their own. Sometimes it's just fun to dabble in the “what-ifs” of the world, and that's what this is. Readers of the series will know that Pike and Jennifer got married, but there is no real introspection on what that meant. What would a honeymoon involving Pike, Jennifer, and Amena look like? It most certainly wouldn't be your standard affair, and so I decided to flesh that out here. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 1

Buck Thompson didn't look like a master art thief. He looked more like a stevedore. Six feet tall, with a full beard and scars on his knuckles, he was a portly man with wide ears, each now sprouting hair like a werewolf as he grew older. He tended to flannel, work boots, and Carhartt jackets. He was the last person someone would suspect of being an art thief. Drugstore or gas station? Sure, that would fit, because he had, in fact, robbed both at one time or another. But he was smart, his intelligence hidden beneath the flannel.

He'd lucked into a piece of art that was worth over one hundred million dollars, and was now trying to figure out how to translate the canvas into money. And had come upon a wild scheme that just might work.

To the man in front of him, examining a seascape painting, he said, "Can you do it? Can you camouflage the painting to look like a Caravaggio?"

"Yeah, I can do it, but anyone who looks closely will see it's a forgery."

"That's the point. It's *supposed* to be a copy. Hell, there are twelve known in existence. The man who owns one is the guy that's going to assume this forgery for display. Nobody's going to inspect it—unless it has glaring deficiencies. Can you do that? Using the original as a guide?"

"Why does he want two?"

"He doesn't. We're going to confuse this one with the other one he owns. That's all."

The old man in front of him looked more like a janitor than a painter, but that was also expected. His name was Miles Turtledove, and he'd been a wizard at armored car robberies in his youth, right up until he wasn't. He'd been remanded to Attica prison for thirty years, which is where Buck had met him, and where Miles had learned he had a talent for painting. A unique

talent. Miles could duplicate any painting on earth, and if he used the exact same materials—canvas, wood, type of paint, whatever—it was hard to discern who was the imitator and who was the master.

Miles had never used his talent for ill-gotten gains before, mainly because he didn't need to. He'd become somewhat of a local celebrity in New York with his works, because of both his bad-boy past and his skill. Want your own *Mona Lisa*? He could give it to you, right down to the shadows. Everyone knew it was a fake, but it was so close to the real thing that it gained him a following. He'd become a little bit of his own celebrity, with moneyed people in Manhattan clamoring for one of his creations. Since his parole from prison he'd made a lot of cash off his skill, but this was the first time he'd been asked to use it for a crime.

Not that he really cared. With the amount of money involved, it would be worth the risk.

Buck continued, "The main thing is that he has to be able to strip off the stuff you're doing to the original painting. He has to be able to get the painting underneath. Nobody cares about your skill on this one. Can you do it?"

Miles turned around and said, "How the hell would I know? You came up with this. Yeah, I can paint over the rice paper, and yeah, it'll look pretty good, but I can't promise it won't damage what's underneath."

He pointed a brush at Buck, saying, "If you believe this is going to be something like *The Thomas Crown Affair*, where someone just hoses the painting down, revealing what's underneath, things don't work that way."

Truthfully, Buck *did* think that. In fact, the movie had given him the idea, but he had no expertise in painting whatsoever.

He said, "As long as it can be removed. That's the main thing. He can do his own restoration when it's done."

Miles chuckled and said, "Well, I'm using a weak oil-based paint as the core, and a water-based paint on the layer, but truthfully, this painting should have been restored before I even started."

Known as Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, it was the master's only known seascape, and had been prominently displayed at a place called the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum until March 18, 1990. On that night, thirteen works of art were stolen in what would become the largest art heist in world history, valued at over half a *billion* dollars. None of the works were ever recovered, and most of the men suspected of involvement had died

—some violently, others by natural causes.

Buck's ex-wife was the cousin of a friend of a man who'd apparently been involved, and when that cousin had died seven years ago, he'd been asked to clean out the barn on the outskirts of Boston to help out the family, cataloguing everything and placing the things of value in storage. He'd grumbled, because ordinary labor was anathema to him—especially when he wasn't getting paid—but his ex-wife had promised a relief from two months' alimony, and so he'd agreed. Then he'd found the rolled-up canvas.

He immediately knew what he held, as the Gardner Museum heist was literal lore in Boston's local crime scene. He'd ransacked the place at that point, but none of the other paintings were found. That didn't really matter to Buck, as the painting he held was worth over one hundred million dollars. The problem was how to unload it because everyone knew it had been stolen.

He'd done some research and found that *that* was the biggest obstacle. As soon as such a painting became available, with the requisite hooks out for buyers, invariably the only one who bit was law enforcement.

In the end, there was just no way to sell a stolen masterwork unless you were hired by the person who wanted it. Putting little teasers out into the art world, hoping to get someone interested, it invited all the wrong sorts of interested. History was replete with spectacular heists that had netted absolutely nothing but a jail sentence. He was sure that was the reason none of the Gardner paintings had ever surfaced. Since finding the canvas seven years ago, he'd studied up on the phenomenon, and had learned that hard truth.

Paintings were different from other thefts of value, such as gold statues or famous jewels. For those, the gold could be melted down or the jewels broken up—at a steep loss from the cultural value, but a value, nonetheless. For art? What are you going to break up and sell? The paint? You had to have someone willing to buy the painting, and no collector would touch a piece of art outside the system—especially if he knew it was stolen from a brazen heist.

The latest he'd read about was a 2007 daylight robbery in the Jules-Chéret Fine Arts Museum of Nice, France, where gunmen walked away with over one hundred million in art. Three years later, they were desperate to offload the treasure but could find no buyers. There was only one who showed interest, a Russian member of organized crime, and they'd eagerly attempted to sell. He turned out to be an FBI agent, the paintings were recovered, and

all the men went to jail.

The only way to succeed in such a heist was to have a buyer on board before the theft, and that's what Buck decided to do: find a guy who would have hired him in the first place. But that was no easy task.

He needed someone who didn't care about the provenance, but was willing to take the risk of purchase, be that to hang in his basement bar next to a Rolling Rock beer poster or simply to put in a safe because he knew he owned something secret. And Buck had a few contacts to make that happen—but he needed to be careful. Unlike blaring loud and wide that he had the canvas, he'd spent seven long years tracking down a buyer, never being loud enough to attract attention.

Using contacts within the Irish Mafia in Boston, he'd made connections with the Italian Mafia, and then had springboarded into the real world of mafioso work in Italy, finding a buyer: a man from Naples, Italy, who was extremely rich, and apparently extremely connected to the underworld. The kicker was he collected fine art.

He'd never been arrested, never even been openly accused of wrongdoing, but everyone in Italy knew what he represented. He was real. There was no way he was an FBI agent pretending to be a Russian oligarch.

The dance had taken over a year, but eventually, they'd come up with a plan, and now it was up to Buck to make it happen.

The rewards were incredible, but so was the risk. If anything went wrong on this, he knew that he was the expendable pawn. There was no way that the man in Naples would chance getting arrested, and Buck understood he was the only linkage for that to happen. If things went sideways, the Italians wouldn't allow him to be arrested.

If something went wrong, he was a dead man walking.

Chapter 2

I tried to wrestle the wheel away from Knuckles, saying, “I’m the one who needs the practice here! Let me do it.”

He shoved me aside. “This requires touch. You’ll wreck the boat, and it’s my ass on the line here. My name is on the rental.”

I said, “That was because I thought being in the Navy actually mattered. You don’t know anything more than I do about driving a boat. And you won’t be there in Positano. Get out of the way.”

Knuckles was a Navy SEAL, which meant I’d thought he knew something about boats simply because he was in the Navy, so I’d had him put his name on the rental, but it turned out, he was as bad as I was when it came to watercraft. He didn’t know a damn thing about boats, other than how to dive off one into the water. I’d flown him down to show me the ins and outs of boating before our trip, only to have him look at the widget in question, figure out how it worked, then lecture me on *how it worked*.

In Charleston, South Carolina, one didn’t need a boat license to rent a watercraft, but I did for Italy—well, I did if I wanted to rent anything larger than a johnboat—so I was supposedly getting some instruction from Knuckles before I took the test, which had so far proven futile.

I’m not sure why I thought he’d be a help, because his Navy time certainly did him no good. Hell, at one point, I’d even owned a sailboat here in Charleston. An extreme fixer-upper that I’d lived on for a time. I’d never taken it out on the water because it wasn’t seaworthy—but apparently I knew more about boats than Knuckles did, and I was from the Army.

We’d spun around Charleston’s harbor, each taking turns going up and down the Wando River, gradually getting faster and faster as we tried to one-

up each other, until we'd eventually tired of the back-and-forth. We'd driven to the mouth of Shem Creek for a little bit of an afternoon siesta, and Knuckles was refusing to leave the cockpit.

Jennifer had had enough.

Behind me, she said, "You guys are absolutely pathetic. Pike, I'm getting the boat with the skipper."

We both quit fighting, me turning around and saying, "You can't do that. I can drive the boat."

"No, you can't. Amena has more maturity than you two. There is no way I'm getting on a boat alone with you in Italy."

"You won't be alone. Amena will be with us."

Amena was my adopted daughter, currently sitting on a bench at the back of the boat and looking at me disapprovingly. I could tell she was thinking about siding with Jennifer, which I needed to short-circuit.

I said, "Right, Amena? All for one and one for all?"

She slid her eyes to the right, glancing at Jennifer, and I knew she was about to agree with Jennifer not because of my boating skills, but because of what had happened earlier.

Before we'd left for the harbor, Amena had come out of her bedroom in a bikini, with a bottom half that looked like it had less fabric than a dishcloth and the top trying mightily to accent her assets that weren't there yet. It was a nonstarter for me. She was only fourteen, but she was exotic, like something only seen in magazines. It was hard to tell where she came from, with hazel eyes, dark skin and a lithe body, and I didn't think the bikini was appropriate.

In my eyes, bikinis had a gap. If you were five or six, wear them all day long, but after that, until you were sixteen or so, you wore a one-piece. I just didn't think it was right for a fourteen-year-old to wear a bikini—especially her, because of how attractive she was. She didn't get it, but I did. When she looked in a mirror, like every other teenager, she saw nothing but flaws, but I saw what others would, and a bikini at that age was unseemly. Younger girls, fine. Older women, fine. In between, where predators lived, give it a rest.

She'd become incensed, because she was all about becoming an "American" and believed I was being a prude. Which, of course, I was. She'd seen the Kardashians on YouTube and television and thought that was something to emulate. I thought it was something to burn. Then *I* had become incensed when I learned Jennifer had bought it for her.

We'd had a little bit of a standoff when I'd found out that they'd gone

shopping precisely to get the swimsuit. Jennifer had ripped me up and down about my views, which honestly surprised me. Amena was, after all, our daughter now. Jennifer said she wouldn't wear a bikini either, asking me if we had any potato sacks for the boat, and that was the end, because Jennifer not wearing a bikini on a boat would have been a travesty.

Which is to say, I lost. The final nail in the coffin was Amena telling me I'd only be happy if she wore a burka. That was a deep cut, because she'd fled Syria from the Islamic State, who wanted *every* female to wear a burka.

Knuckles kept the boat at idle, heading into Shem Creek, and Amena looked at me with hooded eyes. I waited, but knew she was going to support my side, no matter what I'd said earlier. Because at the end of the day, she was a pirate just like I was, and she had a connection to me that no stupid argument could break. She was wearing the damn bikini, after all.

She said, "Let's see him park it and then make a decision."

Knuckles grinned, stepped back and said, "All yours. Don't wreck the boat."

I said, "Okay then, all hands on deck. Amena, get the bumpers ready. Jennifer, get the throw line."

We pattered into the mouth of Shem Creek, passing the shrimp boats tied to the docks, and headed to Red's Icehouse, a low-country staple of boats and boozing. I passed a bunch of idiots on paddle boards lazily heading out to the mouth of the creek, not realizing that when the tide reversed, they'd be paddling their asses off just to maintain their position, ending the day with a sunburn and sore muscles.

Yeah, that's from experience.

We pulled up to the dock of Red's, with Amena looking at me intently and Knuckles shouting all sorts of crap like he knew what he was talking about. But he didn't.

I slid the boat in next to another one, which is how Red's did its docking—with each boat tied to the one next to it—and Amena's gaze never left my eyes. She really didn't want to screw up, which is something I loved about her. If we'd have been hit with an iceberg and the boat was about to sink, she'd still have held those bumpers waiting on me to give her the word.

I flicked my head, and she dropped the bumpers. I slid next to the boat, gently kissing it, and Jennifer tossed the deckhand the rope. Within seconds, we were tied up. I said, "See, I can do this. It's not that hard."

Knuckles said, "You're just lucky. You almost slammed into that other

boat.”

Which was a lie.

Everyone at the bar had watched us approach, and I could see the men ogling Jennifer. Which I knew would happen. Long and lean, Jennifer looked like a surfer, with blond hair stuffed into a baseball cap and an athletic motion that told anyone who was looking that she was more than their equal. It actually gave me pleasure, because the entire point of this expedition was to get ready for our honeymoon, and *I* was the one with her.

Jennifer and I had finally tied the knot and become officially married, not the least because we needed to be a “parenting unit” for the adoption of Amena, and Jennifer had demanded a honeymoon. Like, a real one. Not some three-day Caribbean cruise or a beach house on the Isle of Palms here in Charleston. So, she’d done the research and found the town of Positano on the Amalfi Coast of Italy, at a hotel called the Villa Magia—which was rated as one of the best hotels in the universe.

With less than a dozen rooms, and a staff at your beck and call, she’d booked it, spending the better part of our yearly wages. She’d started researching various excursions, and had come upon a boat trip to Capri, complete with a captain. I’d balked at that, deciding I could be my own captain and save some money, and here we were, me learning how to drive a boat from a guy who didn’t know any more than I did. But that didn’t really matter in Charleston.

Most people here faked driving a boat just like Knuckles and me, with everyone apparently thinking the engine was powered by Bud Light.

Jennifer put on a cover-up, and Amena followed suit, because she did whatever Jennifer did. She, like Amena, had no idea of her effect on the opposite sex, which I just loved, because I wasn’t what you’d expect to see with her. Knuckles, yes. Me, no.

Knuckles looked like he belonged with the women on the boat. About six-two, with shaggy black hair, broad shoulders, and ropy muscles, he had a chiseled face like he’d been ripped from a romance novel. Me, not so much. We were about the same height, but I was thicker than him in the muscle department, and had a face that was a little battered, with a nose bent slightly off-kilter from a fight and a scar that traced a path through my eyebrow and into my cheek, cutting a swath through my two-day beard.

Jennifer said I looked like a pirate, and I took that as a compliment.

We scampered across the two other boats tied to the dock and went up the

ramp into the bar itself, lucking out with a table right next to the water. The waitress came over and we ordered, me glowering at every male who ogled Jennifer. They, naturally, would not meet my gaze. Sometimes looking like a pirate works out.

Knuckles said, “So, when’s the test?”

“Three days. It’s just on paper. Nobody’s going to make me drive a boat like a car test, which is a little bit ridiculous, if you ask me.”

He laughed and said, “Well, they’re probably more concerned with you knowing the rules of the water than they are about being able to operate your boat.”

“Still a little bit stupid.”

Amena said, “Especially since you can’t operate a boat.”

I said, “Hey, come on. That docking was pristine, was it not?”

Nobody said anything, so I turned to Jennifer, repeating, “Was it not?”

She looked at Amena and said, “I guess we’ll let you rent the boat. But you are *not* going to go ripping around the Amalfi Coast like you did today. It’s supposed to be a pleasure cruise.”

“I can do that.”

Knuckles said, “How are you guys paying for this? Did you fall into some money or something?”

I glanced at Jennifer, not sure if we should spill the beans, and then Amena said, “Grolier Recovery Services is going to take a look at some old church in Positano. Jennifer says it’s a tax write-off.”

My mouth fell open, and Jennifer hurriedly interjected, saying, “That’s not what I said. There is an excavation in Positano, and it’s ongoing. All I did was ask if we could see it with our company, and maybe offer our services. They agreed.”

Knuckles laughed and said, “Didn’t take long to figure out how to use the Taskforce to pay for your honeymoon.”

Jennifer and I—and Knuckles, for that matter—were all members of a special operations unit called Project Prometheus, whose sole purpose was preventing terrorist attacks against United States national interests. The project itself was comprised of a bunch of seemingly civilian organizations, all in deep cover. Grolier Recovery Services was ours—a boutique archeological firm that ostensibly traveled the world looking at pottery shards. We’d used it plenty of times to put some terrorist’s head on a spike, but had never abused it.

Until now.

Technically, it wasn't a true abuse of power, in that we had to do some real work to keep the cover functioning and realistic, but we were stretching it by using it on our honeymoon.

I said, "Hey, that's not what we're doing. It's more like using airline points for a flight. It's not like the Taskforce is paying the freight on this. No taxpayer money. All we're going to do is deduct the expenses of the trip from our taxes. That's all."

He held up his hands and said, "I'm not judging. And knowing how you two operate, I'm sure there's going to be a shitshow at the end anyway. A tax write-off will be the least of it."

Chapter 3

Buck pulled his car into the old farmhouse and sat for a minute. He could still turn all of this off. Doing so would mean he would lose a veritable fortune, but it would also ensure his existence. He had a good life. Not great, but good. Did he really want to enter the world of the Italian Mafia? Maybe it would be better to just walk away and hang the damn painting in his own basement.

He remembered what his cousin had told him—one connected to the Irish Mafia: “You think it’s an easy score, and easy money. Then you learn that once it’s done, it has tentacles all its own. You never leave a score. You constantly look over your shoulder waiting on some idiot to talk. And then those idiots start dying, making you wonder if you’re next.”

Did he want to live that life? Would the Italians feel he was a threat and come for him in two, ten, or twenty years?

Yeah, he did, and he had twenty-five million reasons why. The painting was worth more than four times that, but he wasn’t greedy. Well, he was greedy enough to ignore the danger the transaction represented. He’d take the money and disappear, possibly to a foreign country, but most definitely away from here.

He opened the car door and took a breath, the air unseasonably crisp in September, his exhale turning to vapor. He closed the door loud enough for Miles to hear, and then pushed open the barn door, seeing the artist in front of the frame, putting on the finishing touches, the original to his left on a stand.

Buck looked at the canvas in front of Miles, then the one on the easel next to him, and said, “Damn, you *are* good. Looks exactly the same.”

Miles grinned and said, “The secret is in the paint. Gotta at least act like

you've done this a century before."

Sitting in front of him were two paintings by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, titled *The Taking of Christ*. Twelve such paintings were known to exist, and the dispute as to whether each was an original painted by the master or painted by an acquaintance or student of the master was continually debated. Ukraine had one that was supposed to be by the master, but was contested. Ireland had the one true version, until it too, was contested. All of that didn't matter to Buck, because his contact in Italy had one as well. Whether it was a real Caravaggio was irrelevant, as long as Miles could duplicate it.

Buck said, "Will that rice paper peel off? Can he get to the real painting underneath?"

"Yeah, I don't think that will be an issue, if he has anyone with half a brain about art, which, if he's gone to this trouble, he does."

"Okay, let's box them up. We have to pack for the trip."

Miles said, "Hey, I do the paintings. You never said what the 'trip' is about. What's the play here?"

Buck sighed, then said, "It's a little convoluted, but the payday is the same."

Miles waited a beat, then said, "And?"

Buck did a little circle in the barn, wondering what to say to Miles, and settled on the truth.

"Okay, here's the deal. That painting you just coated in another is worth over a hundred million dollars. We're going to get twenty-five. That's the endstate."

"How? Why did I cloak it in a painting of another? What's the point of that?"

"The *point* here is that the one you painted over is well-known as having been stolen. The *point* is that I had to find someone willing to take it, knowing it was stolen. The *point* is that we transfer this painting in Italy and get a payday. Are you good with that?"

Miles sat for a minute, then said, "No, I'm not. What's the transfer?"

Buck didn't expect the inquisition and was a little hesitant to expose the seedy underbelly of what was about to occur, not the least because his contact in Italy had told him not to. But he was in a hard position. He needed Miles.

"Okay, here it is: I've sold this painting to a connected man in Italy. He wants the painting, but wants nothing to do with the original theft. We've

come up with a method of transfer. There's going to be a Caravaggio retrospective in the town of Positano, Italy. My buyer has been asked to contribute his painting—the same one you just copied. We slip this one in, and he gets both back clean as a whistle.”

“But the one I copied isn't a real Caravaggio. It's a duplicate.”

Buck laughed and said, “Yeah, well, there's a fight about that, but honestly, they don't care. They apparently couldn't get enough real ones, so ones that are close are good enough. The bottom line is that we get this injected into the art world, and then my client gets the real painting underneath.”

“How are we going to do that?”

Buck liked the “we” in that sentence. If Miles was reticent about the operation, he would have said, “you.” Miles was on board whether he knew it or not.

Buck said, “That painting you've been copying is worth a few million dollars. It's known as a Caravaggio imitation that was painted at the same time—and might be an original, depending on who is talking, so it's still worth a lot of money.”

Buck paused, starting to pace again and wondering if he should even be giving this much information. He'd been told of the punishment for failure, and Miles was a link in that endstate. But he was also the only man Buck trusted. He decided to let it all out.

“Okay, look. Here's the deal. The client sent that Caravaggio here with great fanfare for a refurbishment before it goes to the exhibition. The press covered its flight. They know it's here. Of course, it didn't go to an art house for refurbishment. It came to me. We're going to send the original out of here undercover, and the one you've painted will go back out with the same fanfare, for the exhibition, just like it came in.”

“You're going to send this painting out as an original Caravaggio? Or at least an original painting from that time? Are you insane? I can't match that. Anyone who takes this thing to an X-ray machine will know it's a fake. In fact, they'll see the painting underneath.”

Buck held his hands up and said, “Whoa, there. None of that is going to happen. For one, it's known as a contested Caravaggio. For another, nobody is going to X-ray anything. They invited him to present. They aren't going to accuse him of presenting a fake. The very fact that he sent it to the United States for refurbishment ‘proves’ it's real. That's what makes this so perfect.”

Miles mulled over the words, then said, “So what do we have to do? What’s our risk?”

And that was the crux of the problem, because the risk was extensive. His contact in Italy wanted a clean break—absolutely no way to be connected with the transfer, and he’d created a mess of a way for the repatriation of the real painting to make sure that happened.

Buck sighed and said, “Well, it’s not that easy. We put the fake back into the system for the retrospective in Positano, so it’s clean, but we have to take the original to Croatia, then rent a boat and transport it to a cave on the coast of Capri, Italy.”

Miles looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “You think I’m going to leave here and fly to Croatia, rent a boat, then travel to Italy to drop off the real one? Why don’t we just ship it like the fake? How hard is that to do?”

Buck knew that was going to be a problem with Miles, because it didn’t make any sense to him either, but it was what the client wanted. The client didn’t care about the shipping, but did care about the endstate of the transfer. That had to be clouded, without any shipping labels or billing codes, and that was why he demanded the method that he did.

Buck said, “We *are* shipping it like the fake, just without the fanfare. But we can’t send it to the guy’s house. He wants a cutout. That’s all this is. He can’t own two of those paintings. He gets the one you did, shows it at the exhibition, and takes it home. Meanwhile, we transfer the real painting to him undercover. When he gets home, he peels off the painting you did and hangs the real Caravaggio back on the wall. He has them both.”

Miles looked at the two paintings and said, “This is really convoluted. What happens if our transfer is intercepted? What happens if we’re arrested shipping stolen artwork from Croatia to Italy?”

“We’re in deep shit, and I don’t mean from the cops.”

Miles sighed and said, “I don’t know, man. This is a lot more than just painting something.”

Buck pressed, saying, “It is, but twenty-five million is the reason why. You don’t get that price point painting *Mona Lisas* for the New York jet set.”

Miles turned to him, thought a moment, then said, “I’ll do it, but you need to remember something here.”

“What’s that?”

Miles returned to the paintings and said, “You can’t spend any money if you’re dead.”

Chapter 4

Jennifer said, “Are we really going to sit here until that guy leaves? Seriously?”

I looked at Amena and saw her imperceptibly nod. Jennifer saw it too and rolled her eyes. She said, “The upper deck of the grotto is closed, Pike. *Closed*. Does that mean anything to you?”

I smiled and said, “Not really.”

“We have dinner reservations in one hour, and we’re out here in the middle of the ocean.”

I said, “The restaurant is just around the point. Plenty of time.”

She shook her head and said, “Okay, pirate. But if this goes bad, it’s on you.”

Unbidden, a smile broke out on Amena’s face, immediately wiped by Jennifer glaring at her.

We were sitting off the coast of the island of Capri in a boat we’d rented from an agency in Positano, Italy, and the craft was pretty sweet. Forty-three feet long, it was something called a “Seaway SeaCube,” and was way out of my price point. It had a lower cabin for sleeping that included a tiny kitchen and a shower, and was literally a small yacht, and its cost reflected that fact. The boat rented for over two thousand euros a day, but we’d managed to get the cost down to about five hundred because we didn’t need a captain (silently patting myself on the back), and the curator of the church being excavated in Positano knew the owner of the craft.

Our meeting with the church people wasn’t for a couple of days, so we’d opted not to start our hotel expenditures until that time. There was no way we’d be able to write off the expenses of our hotel before we’d actually met

the UNESCO folks, and our room was over seven hundred a day, so I'd rented the boat for the first night.

We'd flown into Naples and taken a shuttle to Positano, riding in a Mercedes van provided by the hotel, a crazy guy at the wheel who spent most of the time honking his horn and alternating between slamming the accelerator and hammering the brakes. The coastal road was one hairpin turn after another, and while I wanted to show confidence to Amena, by the time we reached our future hotel, I was gripping the overhead handle with white knuckles, and the only thing keeping me from punching the driver in the face was Jennifer's glare. Well, that, and I was sure if I did we were going to plunge four hundred feet into the ocean.

Our hotel was the Villa Magia, a beautiful boutique hotel, and while we couldn't stay there the first night, they'd agreed to take our bags and store them, which was pretty nice. The cursing driver had stopped literally on the side of the road on the upper level of the town and two porters had popped out of a stairwell leading down the cliff, grabbing our luggage and running off down the stairs like stevedores.

We'd stowed the luggage, checked in for the next night, and then had proceeded on our adventure, taking what was on the map a short walk to the marina. A short walk as the crow flies, but we were on a mountain. To get there, we had to traverse one gigantic staircase cut into the stone that threaded through the various pastel buildings on the cliffs, with one selfie-taker after another capturing the view. It went on forever. I mean *forever*. We passed several groups of tourists on the way back up, and all of them were panting and holding the rails, with a few stupid enough to be lugging suitcases. All I could think about was that we would have to climb back up the damn thing the next day.

We met the boat owner, I proved I had a license to drive it from the United States, and off we went, with Jennifer giving me the side-eye the whole time about my abilities. But Amena loved it, becoming my first mate. I didn't even say a word about the bikinis, mainly because Jennifer was wearing one. It was a little brisk out on the water, the September air not as warm as the summer, but Jennifer wouldn't let on that she was cold, because in so doing, she'd have to admit the bikini she'd bought for Amena was a waste of money. I enjoyed the challenge as I wore a jacket for the weather.

We'd traveled all around Capri, seeing the usual tourist sights, like the Green Grotto and the infamous Blue Grotto—which was a little bit of a pain

in the ass. We had to park the boat, then get in a little skiff that traveled through a hole that was barely large enough for the width of the bow, with us ducking down when commanded. The interior was just like they'd advertised—it was spectacular. Like being in a miniature boat in an aquarium in a doctor's office, only it was real. The water was sky blue, and the lighting was something that Hollywood would have spent countless dollars to recreate, but it was here every day, and natural.

We'd decided to end our tour at "Grotto Bianca," or the White Grotto, before heading into a marina at Capri for dinner. When we'd approached, we'd found five other boats lined up to see the grotto. I didn't really care about another grotto, especially this one, because all it had as a claim to fame was that its dripping stalactites were all white, giving it the name. The only reason we'd even traveled here was because Jennifer said it had some historical significance. Apparently, one of the stalactites looked like the Virgin Mary, and was a huge draw.

I'd seen the boats waiting and said, "Okay, we've seen enough grottos. Let's go get a beer."

Jennifer said, "Just get a little closer, so I can see the Madonna."

I'd done so, edging nearer, and saw that the grotto itself had a split level. The lower one was where the boats came to see the white stalactites and the Virgin. But there was an upper chamber, and it had a railing that overlooked the ocean. Something that intrigued me. What was up *there*?

Jennifer had seen me looking and had immediately said, "No, Pike. You aren't going up there. It's not allowed. Apparently, some priests use that chamber once a year to hold a ceremony. We can't go up there."

I said, "Yeah, we can. I see the staircase. There's a boat ramp right on the edge."

She stood up, crossing her arms, and said, "We are *not* going up there."

She didn't know it, but her reluctance was catnip to me. Yeah, we were most *definitely* going up there.

I said, "Amena, you want to go up that staircase and see what's inside?"

Amena looked at me, then Jennifer. She didn't want to be in the middle of a fight, but then again, she'd been in plenty of them on our long road to a family. And it *was* our honeymoon. I figured I was good, because she was a damn pirate at her heart. She wanted to see what was up there as much as me—not the least because it was forbidden.

By this time there was only one boat left, and I saw two people leave the

gunwale and begin walking up the stone staircase. I said, “Look at that. *They’re* going up. Nobody’s arresting *them*.”

Jennifer turned, took a long look, then said, “They’re carrying something up. They probably belong here.”

Chapter 5

Buck walked up the staircase cut into the rock like he was trying to hear a noise, each step slower than the last. Miles finally got sick of it and said, “What are you doing? Let’s get this thing in there and call it a day.”

Buck turned around and hissed, “Shut up! There might be someone in there.”

Carrying the painting, Miles was a little miffed, saying, “Bullshit. We’ve been out watching from the boat for four hours. There’s nobody up there. Let’s leave this thing and be done with it.”

Buck said, “Just let me go look. Stay here.”

Miles set the framed picture down and said, “Go, then. But make it quick. I’m ready to get home.”

Buck continued up the stone steps, glancing furtively around, which caused Miles to roll his eyes. There was nobody near them, and if they were, it would be painfully obvious. The staircase threaded straight up through the rocks, with no foliage or anything else to hide anyone. Miles sagged back onto a rough-cut step, lighting a cigarette. Buck disappeared from view.

Eventually, he heard a hiss, then saw Buck above him waving. He picked up the package and began climbing the final stairs into the cave.

He entered a small chamber with a wire railing looking down into the ocean. He said, “What is this? We’re going to leave the painting here?”

Buck said, “That’s what I was told. We put it here, and they’ll come get it. They’re probably looking at us right now.”

Miles said, “Are you fucking serious? This painting is worth millions of dollars. We’re going to just leave it here?”

“We are. That’s what they said we’d do.”

Miles squinted his eyes, not liking the arrangement. Wondering if he was now becoming the bait.

Buck said, "What? What's the issue? Set it over here."

Miles said, "Why didn't they pick someplace that wasn't a tourist attraction? Why are we leaving it here?"

Exasperated, Buck said, "Because all of the coves around Capri are staked out for smugglers. Jesus, man, they do this for a living. They can't use an isolated cove because that damn thing is being watched. Nobody is watching this place precisely because it's a tourist trap."

Miles grudgingly agreed with the assessment, leaning the canvas in its dry bag against the stone of the cave. He said, "So, when do we get the money?"

Buck said, "When they get the painting. Let's get out of here. The quicker we leave, the quicker we'll get paid."

Miles tapped the painting with his hand. He said, "What happens if this thing gets stolen after we leave? Aren't we on the hook for it?"

Exasperated, Buck said, "It's *their* plan. They dictated this."

He pointed out to the ocean and said, "They're watching us right now. They'll come up when we leave."

Chapter 6

Amena watched the boat break free from the small platform of stone, then looked at Pike, wondering if he would follow through. She really wanted to explore the upper chamber, but also knew this was supposed to be a vacation for Pike and Jennifer alone. She didn't want to be seen as interrupting that, as she was lucky to even have been invited.

She looked into the cavern above the stalactites, seeing the area no ordinary tourists were allowed to enter, and yearned to explore it. The grotto itself was split between a lower chamber on the water, where they—along with every other tourist—had explored earlier, and the upper chamber, which was off-limits. Like Pike, it was something that appealed to her, and she wanted to explore it.

What was up there?

She glanced back to Pike and Jennifer, both underneath the deck of the boat Pike had rented, seeing Jennifer shake her head. And she knew that was the end. She sighed, not unduly upset. It was, after all, their honeymoon.

She sat down on the gunwale of the boat, wondering about the menu of the dockside restaurant Jennifer had found. She hoped it had chicken fingers. She was a little sick of eating something that was supposed to “excite” her palate when it didn't satisfy her hunger.

Honestly, she'd felt a little like a third wheel since they'd arrived—which she was—and didn't enjoy sitting on top of the deck to see her two “parents” decide what she was allowed to do. Maybe she shouldn't have come at all.

She glanced back down and saw them arguing again and came close to telling Pike to forget the whole idea, not wanting to be the reason for a fight, then saw Jennifer lean into Pike and kiss him on the lips. Pike took the kiss

and then wrapped his arms around her, drawing her into an embrace. They remained like that for a full minute. Then Pike broke the embrace, kissing her on the forehead. He said something to her, and she wagged her finger again, shaking her head. It brought a smile to Amena's face even as she knew that meant they weren't going up.

Pike never did anything Jennifer didn't want. He just wouldn't. That kiss was the death knell. They weren't going to explore the cavern no matter what Pike wanted, because he cared too much for Jennifer to cross her. And she did, too.

But she *really* wanted to see that cave.

She saw Pike look her way and ducked her head, pretending to fiddle with something on the deck. Jennifer pulled a small marine radio off of a shelf and handed it to him, and she wondered what that was about. Pike came out from the bottom of the boat and said, "So, we going to see what's up there or what?"

She said, "Not if Jennifer doesn't want to. I'm not being a part of that."

Pike said, "Jennifer's just upset she can't go up there with us because someone has to stay in the boat. We're good."

Amena looked down inside the hull and saw Jennifer raise her hands in a "what am I supposed to do" pose.

Amena laughed and said, "Let's go!"

Pike glanced toward the grotto, saying, "Did that other boat finally leave?"

"Yeah. I don't know what they were doing, but they're gone."

He pointed to the line where they'd tied up to a buoy, saying, "Okay. First Mate, untie us. It's getting dark and we have a restaurant reservation."

He went behind the wheel and fired up the engine. She scampered to the front of the boat, leaning out until half her body was hanging over the water, and Pike shouted, "Whoa. Hang on there. Jennifer, can you lend a hand?"

Jennifer came out from below, shook her head at Pike, and went to the bow. Amena said, "You really don't mind?"

Jennifer smiled and said, "Look, if this is the only stupid thing Pike does on this trip, I'll be ahead. It's like a gasket letting off pressure. He gets a thrill, and I get to prevent a catastrophe."

Jennifer turned back to Pike and said, "A little forward. We need some slack."

The boat began to inch toward the buoy, and Amena said, "So you're not mad at me?"

“No, doodlebug, of course not. Just don’t let him do anything stupid.”

Amena grinned and leaned over, removed the rope from the buoy anchor, then shouted, “We’re free.”

She felt Pike gun the engine, and both of them grabbed for something to hold on to, Jennifer rolling her eyes and Amena giggling. In two minutes, Pike was sliding the craft into the makeshift stone dock, saying, “Get the bumpers ready. I don’t want to pay for damage to this thing.”

Both Amena and Jennifer grabbed the rubber bumpers and flipped them over the side just as the boat kissed the rock, harder than was necessary. Pike grimaced, then said, “Probably need a little practice on that.”

Jennifer laughed, jumped to the dock with a line, and anchored the boat, saying, “You two go have fun, but don’t take too long. It’s about a twenty-minute ride to the restaurant, and our reservation is in an hour.”

Pike jumped onto the stone and held out his hands, helping Amena across the hull. He said, “We’ll only be a few minutes.”

She said, “Yeah, sure, just stay on the radio so I can call you back when you forget I’m down here.”

He held it in the air and Amena giggled, looking up the long stairwell cut out of the stone, for the first time feeling some apprehension. She said, “You don’t think anyone’s up there, do you? Like a monk or something living inside?”

Pike laughed and handed her a headlamp to ward off the growing gloom, saying, “No monks, but there might be a troll. I’ll handle him. Let’s go.”

She put on the headlamp and said, “You go first. You’re the commando.”

Pike put on his own headlamp and kissed her forehead, saying, “As you wish,” then flicked his eyes to Jennifer.

She grinned at the movie reference he always used with her and said, “Get up there. You’re wasting time.”

Amena said, “You should come, too. It’s probably full of old relics that you’d love.”

She smiled and said, “Take some pictures for me. Someone’s got to watch the boat.”

Pike said, “Come on, doodlebug. We’re wasting time.”

He started rapidly up the steps, going so fast that Amena couldn’t keep up, forcing her to shout, “Hey, slow down. I’m afraid of falling.”

Pike immediately slacked off and turned around, saying, “Sorry.”

They reached the top of the stairs, crossed a hillock with a couple of trees,

and the stone cuts became a path leading right into the black maw of the cave, the setting sun turning it even darker. Amena stopped, not liking what she saw. She said, "Maybe we should go back."

She was instantly embarrassed by her words, knowing she'd just shown she was afraid, something she was sure would cause Pike to poke fun at her. He did not. He simply said, "If that's what you want. Probably just a bunch of rock anyway, and I *am* getting hungry."

His answer surprised her. He routinely ribbed her for various things, and she realized he only did that when it wouldn't hurt her. She'd just exposed a weakness born of irrational fear, and he wasn't going to pounce because of it. Instead, he was giving her an out by saying he was hungry. His empathy gave her the courage she needed.

She clenched her jaw and said, "Let's go."

He smiled and said, "That's what I thought," then turned back to the path, saying, "I've got the lead."

They went forward more slowly, and she swore that Pike himself was a little apprehensive of what the blackness held. He entered the small arch leading into the cave, his headlamp bouncing off the walls, paused one moment, then kept going. She saw the light inside coming from the balcony over the ocean, giving her courage, and scurried to catch up.

The hallway widened into the cavern itself, the balcony of the upper section of the grotto to her left, and she was disappointed. It was small, maybe thirty feet by thirty feet, and was nothing but stone. No altars, no skeletons, no nothing. She shone her light around and said, "This is it?"

Pike walked to the railing over the ocean, saw Jennifer, and waved. He turned back and said, "Yeah, I guess so. Just a rock cave. But come on, it's still pretty cool."

Amena went to the back of the cavern, flashing her headlamp left and right. She saw something against a wall and hissed, "Pike, there's something here!"

Pike turned away from the railing, saying, "What did you find?"

She went to it, seeing a square bag of some kind. Not old. Modern, like it was made for the weather, with Velcro straps and rubber. She said, "I don't know. What is it?"

Pike went to her, took one look, and said, "That's a dry bag. It's designed to keep something from getting damaged in water."

She grabbed a strap and said, "Let's see what it's hiding."

For the first time, she heard reticence in Pike's voice. He said, "Hang on there. Don't start ripping it open. It's protected for a reason. We came to look, not cause an issue with what's here."

Now excited that she'd found something, she turned around and said, "Aww, come on. We can look and return it just like it was. We won't cause any damage."

In the glow of her headlamp she saw the expressions flit across his face, like he was being torn by the proverbial devil and angel on his shoulders, and knew he wanted to explore the bag as well. He finally said, "Okay, but quickly," and began helping her undo the straps.

They had it open in seconds, and Amena put her light on it, saying, "It's a painting. Why's a painting up here?"

Pike shook his head, saying, "I have absolutely no idea."

Amena pulled out her cell phone, turning on the camera app and saying, "Maybe Jennifer will."

Pike's radio squawked just as her flash went off, Jennifer saying, "Pike, Pike, this is Koko, we've got a boat coming our way, and it's moving very fast."

Pike ran to the railing, saw the wake of a boat smaller than theirs streaming toward them, and said, "Is it the authorities?"

"I have no idea, but they're definitely coming straight at me."

Amena saw him go into commando mode, his voice brisk and controlled, his attitude no longer relaxed. He said, "Wrap it back up. We have to get out of here."

He helped her cinch the straps tight, then said, "We're moving fast back down the hill. If you have to slow down, do so, but I have to be at the bottom by the time that boat arrives. Take your time, but I'm going to be moving out."

She nodded, now afraid simply because of his demeanor, and he saw the fear, shifting back into the Pike she knew, saying, "Don't worry. We're going to be okay. I just have to get down there."

And the words calmed her down, because she knew that was true. Whoever it was couldn't compete with the man she was with. She nodded and said, "Don't wait on me. I'll be right behind you."

He smiled, and said, "Let's go then, little commando," and took off down the path.

They reached the stairs in the cliff face and saw the boat almost to Jennifer.

The stone cuts were a blur, with Pike going down them like a billy goat, leaving Amena wondering how he knew where his feet would end up at each step. The distance grew between them until he was gone, with her still halfway up the mountain. By the time she reached the makeshift stone dock, he was talking to two men from a speedboat blocking their own craft.

She avoided them, running to Jennifer, who helped her onto their boat, saying, "Let Pike handle it. Don't say anything."

"What's going on? Who is it?"

"I don't know, but they seemed a little angry."

Jennifer went to the front of the boat and untied the bow line, waiting on Pike.

Amena looked toward the men, seeing they were young, maybe early thirties, and most definitely weren't the authorities. They had no uniforms, and looked like they were more used to a boxing ring than a boat. She saw Pike hold up his hands, shaking his head, followed by the lead man pointing his finger in Pike's face. Pike said something else, and the man waved his hands at their boat. Pike turned and jogged toward her.

He looked at Jennifer and said, "Guess that was a bad idea. Let's go."

They both jumped onto the deck, Pike got behind the wheel, fired up the engine, and spun the boat around, sending a jet of water behind as he goosed the engine, spearing the hull back into the ocean as fast as he could.

Holding on to the railing, Jennifer said, "What the hell was that all about?"

Pike said, "I have no idea. They barely spoke English, but they didn't like us going up there."

"Who were they?"

The wind picking up, the grotto receding behind them, he said, "They weren't the police, that's for sure. If I were to guess, there's something hinky up in those hills. Drugs or something like that."

Amena's eyes grew large. "You think they're drug dealers, and thought we were stealing their stuff?"

Pike inched the throttle higher and said, "Honey, I honestly don't know what they're doing. All I know is I'm *really* hungry now."

She felt like it was all her fault. She was the one who wanted to go up to the cave. *She'd* caused this. She had almost ruined their honeymoon. She said, "I'm really sorry. I won't ask to do anything like that again."

Jennifer saw her remorse and embraced her, saying, "Oh, stop that. It wasn't your fault. It's his."

Pike gave his pirate laugh and said, “Sorry? I’ll be looking at art galleries in Positano for the next four days. Thanks for the high adventure!”

And she felt the love from them both, bringing back the smile to her face.

Chapter 7

Sitting at an outdoor café on Viale Pasitea, the first road that bisected the staircase heading down to the Positano lower town and beach, Buck split his time glancing at the text messaging app on his phone and staring at the exit to the staircase, his hands nervously picking up the phone every few seconds like a teenager checking for likes on TikTok.

There were two ways out of the Villa Magia hotel, and they both entailed a staircase: one going up and one going down. Miles was on the upside of the staircase, right next to the hotel exit, while Buck was down, on the first street that would allow him to see the people exiting without being seen himself.

Their contacts with the Italians had given them the names and room number of the Americans, but he was still wondering why on earth they had to do this work. They'd dropped off the painting like they'd been told, and instead of getting money, they'd received this new assignment, which wasn't something Buck wanted any part of, not the least because he was growing weary of walking the stairs back and forth.

After dropping off the painting in the cave, they'd spent the night in Positano and met their contacts at a small coffee shop near the pebbled beach for payment. Only they didn't get paid. A couple of muscle-bound pipe-hitters that refused to give their names showed up. Buck had taken to calling them Guido One and Guido Two, and what they said told him his easy money had just become a little harder. Someone had seen the painting after they'd left the grotto, and payment was being withheld until they knew more about who the people represented.

Buck said, "What's that got to do with us? We don't know anyone here, and if we were going to double-cross you, why on earth would we bring the

painting at all?”

In heavily accented English, Guido One said, “They sat off the shore watching you two, and as soon as you left, they went up. Like they knew what you were doing.”

Guido Two said, “We don’t think you were going to double-cross us, but wonder if maybe you were sloppy.”

“Sloppy? How? All we did was what Mr. Salvatore told us to do. Down to the letter.”

“That’s what we want you to figure out. Find out what those people are up to. If they’re just tourists, like they told us, then you get paid. If not, we’ll have to determine what we’re going to do.”

Miles spoke for the first time. “What do you want us to do? This is your town. *Your* country. How are we going to find some guys that went up to the cave after we left?”

“First, it’s a woman, child, and man. Second, they are American.”

Incredulous, Buck said, “You think some American tourists are out to get you? A woman and a child?”

Guido Two leaned forward and said, “The man was no tourist.”

Buck waved his arms in the air and said, “How do you know? Because he actually had a wife and kid with him? You guys are insane. I want my money. I did everything you asked.”

“Because I know. I saw him. Looked him in the eye. He’s like us. It’s something you can sense. He’s not here with a wife and kid. He’s here for something else, and that’s what you’re going to find out if you want to get paid.”

“How on earth am I going to do that? Just wander the streets to find him? I don’t even know what he looks like.”

Guido Two passed across a sheet of paper, saying, “We got the information from his boat rental. He had to give them a residence and leave a copy of his passport. He’s staying in the Villa Magia in room seven, in the upper area. This is his name.”

Buck took the slip of paper and said, “If you know so much about him, why don’t you two track him?”

“Because he saw us at the dock next to the White Grotto. We had a little bit of an altercation. He knows us on sight, but not you.”

And now Buck found himself waiting in a café to track a man that he was sure was just a tourist. But he’d do whatever it took to get the money he was

owed. Spending a day following a family around Positano? He could think of worse things.

He watched the flow of pedestrians crossing the street from the upper staircase to the lower, finding it easy to determine who was the tourist visiting and who was the local. The locals attacked the slope of the stairs like they consistently did it five times a day—which they probably did. The tourists looked like they were at thirty thousand feet about to summit Everest, staggering forward as if they needed an oxygen bottle.

His phone vibrated on the table and he snatched it up, seeing Miles's number and wondering how much it was costing for the two to be talking on cell phones based in the United States but located in Italy.

Miles said, "They're out, and they're headed your way, going down to the town."

"How do you know it's them?"

The hotel *Magia* had been created out of two giant old houses, with half the rooms in the front house, and the other half in the back. The room Guido One had given them was in the back, but because of the way the house was built, they couldn't get eyeballs on the actual room number without arousing suspicion. All they could do was watch the steel door leading to an alley from the house itself, which left potentially four other occupied rooms that could exit at one time or another.

"It's them. A man, woman, and a kid of about fourteen."

"What if it's *another* man, woman, and kid staying in that block of rooms?"

"It's not. They're headed your way."

"How are you so sure?"

"Because the guy is just like Guido One said. He's a hard-looking motherfucker. Like a pirate or something. He doesn't fit in with the woman and kid."

"Did you get a picture?"

"Yeah, from the back."

"Send it."

"It's on the way. Let me know when you see them."

Their rudimentary plan was simple—depending on which direction the family chose, one would end up following, and the other would break into their room for a look around. If the group had gone high, Buck would have entered the room, but they were coming to him, so it would be Miles. As long

as Buck had his eyes on the family, Miles would be safe to root around like an unwanted cleaning crew—which is what they were, after stealing a couple of key cards from a maid’s cart.

Buck waved for the waiter and paid his bill, all the while keeping an eye on the upper staircase. A steady stream of people kept popping out from the staircase walls, some walking with a purpose to the lower staircase, others wandering around lost, glancing left and right for the entrance. None of them looked like what Miles had described.

Then a young girl appeared, with dark skin, dark hair, and eyes that were striking. Behind her came a woman who looked like a surfer, with her blond hair in a ponytail, her lithe body clad in a sundress, smiling at the child. She turned around and grabbed the hand of someone else, jerking forward, and a man popped out. Buck saw exactly what Miles had described. Over six feet tall, wearing a simple T-shirt and shorts, he had not an ounce of fat on him, his body framed in muscle. With close-cropped brown hair and a scar that tracked a path through his eyebrow into his cheek, he *looked* like a pipe-hitter. Maybe that wasn’t the case, but he definitely didn’t fit in with the people he was with.

In fact, none of them fit together. The child looked Italian, and the woman looked like she’d make money modeling swimsuits. She most definitely wasn’t the mother of the child, and most definitely didn’t fit in with the man she was dragging along. He looked like he’d be just as happy cracking skulls in a dark alley as walking the streets of Positano, and there was no way a woman with her appearance would be with him—unless he was paying her for the pleasure. But that made no sense. Why pay for an escort and include a child? What was the point of that?

Maybe Guido One was on to something. Maybe this “family” was more than it appeared.

They crossed the street, and he waited a few seconds for them to begin the arduous trek to the bottom, then sprinted to catch up.

He spotted them fairly quickly and stayed one group behind. He expected to see them just smartly walk down the stairs, as he’d already decided in his mind that they were all thrown together for a specific reason, but their actions belied that.

For starters, he saw the woman kiss the man on the lips like she wanted to, wrapping her arms around his neck. And the man treated the child as if he truly cared about her, joking and teasing her on the way down the stairs. The

capstone was them stopping at the various local craft shops along the route, with the woman shopping and the man patiently waiting. None of that would happen if he was paying her, or if this was a setup.

It was confusing.

They reached the bottom of the stairwell, a long stretch that ended in the heart of the town about a hundred meters from the ocean, which would allow them to go multiple different directions. He sped up, skipping down the stairs, and reached the landing in time to see them disappear into one of the small alleys of Positano.

He saw the tall man's head through the crowd and followed, keeping his distance with a crowd between him and them. They went down one alley after another, and then started climbing higher, stopping at an old church for a moment, looking at a map of some ruins, then moving on. Eventually, they reached an art gallery set in a courtyard full of trees. They talked a little bit and then entered. He followed, seeing a sign describing a retrospective of Caravaggio, which caused his first spike. He was no art critic, but even *he* knew the painting that Miles had forged was a Caravaggio. Was this the art show Salvatore talked about?

He followed them in, seeing paintings threaded throughout the space, all from the master painter Caravaggio. Several Italian police were interspersed through the crowd, staring at everyone who entered. He smiled as he wandered about, wondering if he needed a ticket. He did not. He continued on, seeing the "family" stop at a painting, then heard something he really wished he hadn't.

The girl said, "That's the painting from the cave! That's the one we saw!"

The curator of the gallery approached them, engaging them in conversation in a good-hearted way, asking her what she meant about a cave. The scar-faced man pulled the child away, saying she was mistaken. Buck watched the face of the surfer woman, and she looked ashen, like she'd heard something she didn't want to as well.

Nothing else happened in the art gallery, but the next meeting really set him on edge.

The family exited the building, went into various shops as they wound themselves through the cloistered alleys, and then stopped outside the church that was being excavated. The church apparently had some Roman ruins underneath it that held no interest to Buck, but the people the family met did.

The woman, who'd been nothing more than arm candy all day long,

stepped forward and started talking to a uniformed police officer. Talking to him like she had a reason to do so, with an earnestness that belied her surfer appearance. And then the man stepped in, saying something that took the officer aback, causing him to wave his arms.

They settled down, with the officer talking into his radio, and Buck had seen enough.

He pulled out his phone and called Miles.

“What did you find?”

“Nothing. You were right the first time. They’re just a bunch of tourists.”

Buck said, “No, they aren’t. There’s something more. They aren’t here for the scenery. They’re here for the painting.”

Confused, Miles said, “What? What do you mean?”

“Just get out and meet me. I have to call Guido One.”

Miles said something else, but Buck wasn’t listening. He hung up the phone and dialed his contact. When the phone was answered, he said, “We need to talk.”

Chapter 8

I waited for what seemed like hours to get a glass of water, and glared at Jennifer, incensed that her idea of experiencing the “best” of Positano was a restaurant that appeared to treat us like a group of homeless people for the crime of telling them we had a reservation.

Jennifer saw the glower and said, “Pike, everything is slower here.”

I said, “Slower? Yeah, I get that, but come on. We’ve been here ten minutes and don’t even have a menu.”

Amena saw the aggravation building at the lack of service and cut in, saying, “You should just relax. It isn’t like you’re getting shot at. Yet.”

I laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s my point. I’m paying for this. How is it that I can get seated and then sit here for ten minutes without even a glass of water?”

She looked at me, then Jennifer, and said, “When I was in Syria, we never even had fresh water. I’m willing to sit here for a menu.”

And that brought home my “first world” problems. Chagrined, I looked at her, then Jennifer, who was looking back at me with her death-dealing teacher glare. I held up my hands and said, “Okay. It’s a beautiful night. Let’s just watch the sun set.”

We were in a restaurant called La Sponda, which was supposedly one of the finest dining establishments in Positano—an experience that would solidify the reason you’d chosen to come to this part of the Italian coast. While the atmosphere was otherworldly, with a view of the coast and four hundred candles lighting the deck, the pergola above us looking like royal ornamentation from Roman times, the service left much to be desired. If they’d worked at Chik-fil-A, they’d have all been fired.

I knew I was projecting a little bit because of the way we'd been treated earlier by the official representatives of the UNESCO heritage site.

We'd left our hotel around 10 A.M., with a meeting set for 11:30, once again slogging our way down the enormously long staircase to the coast, which wasn't bad, unless you knew you'd have to return the same way.

We'd done some shopping along the route, and I'd actually enjoyed the trip, because the first time we'd raced down those steps, it was due to being late to our boat rental. This time I got to see the history, and I appreciated it as much as Jennifer and Amena did.

We'd bounced down the stairs like a group of vagabonds, doing nothing more than enjoying being alive, and I felt full. We'd reached the bottom and saw we had some time to kill. Jennifer had suggested we go to some art galleries, and I knew she'd planned this, but didn't really mind. If she wanted to see some art, I was all about that. As long as she didn't want to buy it.

Amena thought I'd get mad at the suggestion and had immediately set about telling me that art galleries weren't going to take my manhood and that I shouldn't get mad at the suggestion. Jennifer glanced at me, and without her saying a word, I realized that I was failing as a father.

I stopped outside the T-shirt shop we were next to and said, "Amena, I don't care if we go to an art gallery. If that's what you want to do, that's what I want to do."

She looked at me like I was lying. I said, "I mean it. If that's what you want to do, that's what we'll do."

She said, "Okay. I don't want to do it, but all I'm saying is it wouldn't hurt to get you to like art."

Jennifer laughed and tousled her hair. I said, "Go find an art gallery, genius."

She grinned and we kept going, stopping at every gallery on the walk—and there were a lot. Eventually we had left the lower area and wound around a stone walkway created before our country even existed, and found a gallery that had a little bit of a fanfare surrounding it. Some exhibition of a famous Italian painter called Caravaggio. It had a crowd filing in, and I said, "Who's that guy?"

Jennifer said, "He's someone after your own heart. A painter that spent most of his time kicking someone's ass."

"Huh?"

"He's an artist who was a master painter, but instead of making money off

of his paintings, he spent his time beating people to death who he thought had offended him.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, I’m not. He literally spent most of his life in one brawl or another. He was chased throughout Europe for his escapades, and was also chartered by royalty for his artistic skill.”

I glanced at Amena and said, “Well, then, this sounds like the gallery we should see.”

We went inside, walking amongst the velvet ropes, and were almost to the end, when Amena exclaimed, “Pike! That’s the painting in the cave!”

I looked where she was pointing and saw a dark canvas called *The Taking of Christ*. I said, “Are you sure?”

She pulled out her phone and showed me the picture she’d taken. The harsh light of her phone inside the cave did no credit to the work, but it appeared to be the same painting. I pulled the phone up to eye level, comparing, and it was most definitely the same one.

Jennifer said, “What are you guys doing?”

I said, “Remember when we told you we saw a painting last night? In the cave? This is it.”

She looked at the phone, then the painting. She leaned forward to the plaque in front of the painting and read it. Something I should have done. She said, “I hate to tell you this, but there are at least twelve such paintings in existence, and this one is a copy. The only reason it’s here is because it’s a copy from the seventeenth century. You probably saw a copy that was from the twentieth.”

We’d laughed about the coincidence, then were approached by some pompous guy who wanted to talk about the exhibit. I, of course, did not. I thanked him midsentence, then pulled Amena away. Jennifer glared at my rudeness, then glanced at her watch, saying, “We’re about to be late.”

The sole reason we were here—well, besides getting a cool honeymoon—was to check out some Roman ruins being excavated underneath the Church of Santa Maria Assunta, an old structure that was built on an even older structure. The people doing the excavation were pros, and we’d asked not to help, but to see how they worked for our own business. Of course, that was all a load of doublespeak to me, but Jennifer was genuinely interested, and they’d kindly agreed to let us enter areas where no tourist was allowed. Which meant I could write this whole trip off as a tax deduction.

We wandered back down to the central area where the church overlooked a plaza, meeting some type of Italian park ranger. Jennifer talked to him for a few minutes, giving our bona fides, and he said we could tour the area at nine in the morning the following day, before the excavation opened for the tourists, which aggravated me. I stepped in, waving my hands and saying we'd set up today's meeting to tour the facility, but it did no good.

We were laid on for the following morning for a tour with the crew doing the work. Which was a little bit of a pain in the ass, considering we'd have to wake up way earlier to eat breakfast and then trek the mountain of stairs back down.

We'd finished that conversation and then spent the rest of the day traipsing around the town, getting lunch at an outdoor restaurant on the beach and generally enjoying the day. Eventually we'd hiked up the mountain of stairs to our hotel, with me amazed at the number of locals who seemed to think this was just the price of life. I'd have pulled an Elon Musk and built a damn escalator.

We'd changed clothes and went to the restaurant, this time going high to catch an Uber—small blessings. I'd been worried about showing up late for the reservation, but now, sitting at the table, still waiting on a menu, I didn't feel too bad. The water finally arrived and I'd ordered a rum and coke, figuring I'd drink it with dessert.

As the waiter left, I saw two men take a seat on the other side of the patio. The two people who'd accosted us at the White Grotto the day before.

It wouldn't have been a big deal if I were an actual tourist. I would have ignored them without incident, but I wasn't a normal tourist. I had a healthy appreciation for threats to my environment, and they most definitely were a threat. Maybe not to me, but to someone.

They took a seat to my back, but in full view of Amena. That wasn't going to work. I was worried she'd see them and make a scene. I stood up and said, "Can I take your seat, doodlebug?"

Jennifer said, "What? Why?"

"Just because I'd like the view she has. Is that okay?"

Amena stood up and we swapped seats, but I could tell neither one of them believed my words. I kept my eye on the pipe-hitters for the duration of the dinner—which took literally three hours. By the time we were done I could have built the damn restaurant we were in, with me wondering if the Michelin rating was based on how long it took them to cook the food.

We finally left, catching an Uber outside for the upper level of the stairs leading to our hotel. The men did not follow, which made me sigh in relief.

Jennifer saw that I was a little out of sorts and said, “What’s with you?”

I said, “Nothing. Let’s just go to bed. Big day tomorrow with the excavation. Got to pay for this somehow.”

Amena snickered and said, “Yeah, let’s go to bed. I’m sure you guys are going to sleep.”

We both looked at her in shock, with Jennifer saying, “What’s that mean?”

Looking like a pious elder from the church we were visiting tomorrow, she said, “Nothing. I’m tired, too, that’s all.”

Chapter 9

Jennifer snuggled in tight to Pike's body, running her legs along his. Pike hissed, "Stop that! We can't do anything. She'll hear."

Jennifer nibbled his ear and whispered, "I'll be quiet. I promise."

Pike fought her for a second, but she knew it was a losing battle. He said, "Jennifer, really? Give her a chance to go to sleep at least."

"She's down the hall in a different room." She raised her foot higher, reaching his crotch. He batted it away and said, "I'm not going to be wrestling with you when she comes in here. You know how she is."

"Wrestling with me? Is that how you think of our relationship in bed?"

She knew that wasn't the case, but she was going to leverage what she could. She saw him fumbling for words to take back the stupid statement, and knew she was about to win. She turned off the light and said, "Okay, if that's what you want," then rolled over, her back to him like she was going to sleep. He wrapped his arms around her and said, "Really?" She smiled in the darkness, and then Amena's voice floated out. "Pike? Pike!"

Pike snapped off Jennifer and sat up, turning on the light. He said, "What? What are you doing in here?"

Jennifer pulled the sheets up over the T-shirt she was wearing, within seconds of having shed it. Amena said, "Sorry. You two weren't . . . you know . . ."

Pike glared at Jennifer and said, "No. We're just going to sleep. We have to be at the church in the morning, and I want to eat breakfast before then. What do you need?"

"Someone's at the door. I can hear them trying to work the lock."

"The door?"

He turned to Jennifer and said, “Turndown service? It’s a little late for that.”

Jennifer said, “I have no idea.”

Pike swung his feet over the bed, patted where he’d been lying and said, “You wait here,” then threw on some shorts over his boxers and padded down the hall barefoot.

Because the hotel was built using two old houses, the area they’d rented was chopped up, with the grand bedroom having a balcony that overlooked the falling hillside of Positano, but the second bedroom—Amena’s room—was down a narrow hall that led to the front door. With showers and toilets for each bedroom, it was more of an apartment than a standard hotel arrangement.

Jennifer backed up into the headboard to be out of view of the door, saying, “You’d better hope that someone’s out there, because Pike’s going to tease you unmercifully if it’s an animal sniffing around.”

Amena shook her head and said, “No. Someone’s trying to get in. I heard it.”

Then they both heard Pike shout, “Whoa! What’s going on? Hey, hey, no need for that.”

Jennifer heard a man with a thick Italian accent say, “Get in the bedroom.”

The next thing she knew, Pike was backing through their doorway with his hands in the air. Forcing him into the room were the two muscleheads from the White Grotto, one waving a pistol.

The armed one said, “Get on the bed.”

Pike said, “Okay, okay, just get your finger off the trigger.”

Jennifer wouldn’t have been more shocked if a unicorn had shown up. She snatched Amena in her arms and attempted to leave the bed. The second man waved at her, telling her to stay where she was, then went to the balcony, pulling the shades back and looking out the French door.

Pike glanced at the second man, then at Jennifer. She saw the look and thought, *Is he trying to tell me something?*

He said, “What do you guys want?”

The first said, “We have some questions. Why are you looking at paintings of Caravaggio?”

Pike said, “Caravaggio? What are you talking about?”

The man aimed the pistol at his head, his hand so taut that Jennifer thought he was going to break the trigger, and Pike’s look became clear. *He wants a*

diversion. Split these guys up and give him a chance.

The second man opened the door, glancing out onto the balcony to ensure it was clear. *Big mistake.*

She leapt off the bed and sprinted to the balcony, going right past the second man, his face slack jawed. She hit the outside patio just as the first man screamed, “Get her!”

But that was going to be easier said than done. She heard the man behind her and leapt onto the railing of the balcony patio like a cat, seeing the old red-tiled roof of the lower house to the hotel. She glanced behind her, making sure the man was following, and sprang up and out, landing on the roof with a racket. She stood up, pretending to be finding her balance and scared about what she’d just done, wanting the man to follow. Get him on her turf, where his size and strength didn’t matter.

She glanced back at him, saw he wasn’t following anymore, and sank down, like the height alone scared her. He shouted, “Come back here!”

“I can’t. I can’t jump again.”

The man shook his head, stood unsteadily on the balcony railing, and then flung himself across, thudding into the roof. Before he’d even landed, she was sprinting like a monkey to the other side of the slope, knowing it was a three-story drop to the concrete surrounding the pool below.

He scrambled on his hands and knees, following as fast as he could and shouting at her. She reached the edge, grabbed an old copper drainpipe, and flipped herself over, appearing to disappear into the void above the pool.

She felt the muscles and tendons in her shoulder scream, but held on with her left arm, waiting with the right, her body swaying in the wind. The man scrambled to where she’d disappeared, leaning over, and she reached up, snatching his collar.

He panicked at the hold, trying to back up on the roof, which put him off balance. She jerked with her arm, and gravity took over. He sailed above her head, screaming all the way to the ground, hitting the concrete like a ripe melon.

She scrambled back up to the roof, ran across it, and then repeated her cat maneuver, landing on the balcony to their room. She raced back inside, her entrance causing the man with the pistol to jerk her way, and she saw Pike make his move. He trapped the pistol in two hands, locking up his wrist and rotating to the left, spinning the man in the air and slamming him into the floor.

The man pulled the trigger to the pistol, shooting holes in the wall, almost hitting Amena. She leapt to the other side of the bed, and Pike jammed the man's arm high, the pistol still firing. The man put his foot into Pike's chest and shoved, causing no harm but pushing Pike off his body. Pike rolled upright, the pistol came to bear, and Amena screamed.

He fired, the bullet missing high, and Pike slammed into him, clotheslining the man's neck with his forearm, forcing his skull to torque backwards and flipping the body to the bed frame. The neck caught right on the edge of the solid wood of the frame, an audible snap splitting the air. The man convulsed spasmodically, dropping the pistol.

Pike leapt up, saw Jennifer standing in the room and said, "Where's the other guy?"

"He tried to jump into the pool. He didn't make it."

Pike let out a half breath, half chuckle, letting the adrenaline flow out of his body. He said, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am."

Amena ran to him and he hugged her, saying, "I can't believe you ran out on us. Talk about no loyalty."

And Jennifer realized he thought she'd been a coward. "No, wait, I wanted to . . ."

Pike laughed, this time with real humor. "I know what you were doing. Good call, because it gave me the drop on this guy."

Jennifer said, "What the hell is going on here? These are the guys that were at the White Grotto."

"Yeah, and they were in our restaurant tonight."

"What? They were? And you didn't say anything?"

"I didn't want to cause a panic, and they weren't posing a threat. I just saw them."

"So that's why you took Amena's seat?"

"Yeah, it is. But I really didn't think it was anything."

"What should we do?"

"Go to bed and get back to what we were doing."

Amena scowled and Jennifer said, "Are you insane?"

Pike chuckled again and said, "I guess we call the police. What else can we do?"

Chapter 10

The sun was well above the horizon by the time the local Italian police decided they'd gleaned enough information, with crime scene guys and uniformed policemen questioning each and every one of us over and over again. Finally, they'd removed the bodies and said we were free to go, with the hotel staff stumbling all over themselves to help us, petrified about the Tripadvisor review we'd give them for this.

View is incredible, and the staff is pretty nice, but we shouldn't have to pay extra for the two men who tried to murder us in our room.

Luckily there was no blood splashed across the floor, meaning cleaning the leftovers from the fight was relatively simple. I couldn't say the same about the pool area—it was probably a mess. The hotel had offered us a different room, but there was only one other two-bedroom suite on the grounds, and it was occupied. The best we could get was a single with a pullout couch, and that wasn't going to work for the rest of our honeymoon. Once the police had left, I'd told them we'd just stay where we were. That made them ecstatic, and they'd promised all sorts of free perks as they walked out the door. Finally, we were alone again.

I looked at my watch and said, "We can still make that meeting if we hurry."

Jennifer, her eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, said, "What meeting?"

"The church. We can still make it and pay for this trip."

Jennifer sagged and said, "I don't think I want to go look at that church now. I think we should just go home at this point."

"Go home? You mean the United States?"

"Yeah, Pike, that's what I mean."

“Are you serious? It’s our honeymoon.”

Exasperated, Jennifer said, “We just killed two guys here, and we have no idea why. We’ve been cleared by the police as if it’s some sort of home invasion, but we know that’s not true. Those guys were at the grotto. Let’s just go home.”

I looked at Amena, and she said, “That might be for the best.”

I said, “I’m not going home because of some idiots who happened to enter our room looking for Rolex watches or computers to steal.”

“Pike, come on. You know that wasn’t what they wanted. They asked that weird question about Caravaggio paintings—and that’s the exact artist who was in the grotto. The one on Amena’s phone *and* the one in the art gallery.”

Which was true. I said, “Well, why should we give up our honeymoon? We’ve already paid for everything.”

“You really want to stay in a room where you killed a guy that came in with a gun? Seriously?”

“Okay, but let’s at least go meet the church people. I don’t want to stand them up, and we can get some breakfast.”

She said, “Honestly, I’m not really that hungry after last night.”

I started to answer when someone knocked on the door. *What now?*

I went down to it and answered, seeing an Italian in a rumpled suit. No uniform, but he held out a badge.

He said, “My name is Luca Russo. I work for an Italian police taskforce. Can I ask you some questions?”

I said, “About what? I already talked to the police.”

He said, “Please. It won’t take but a moment. I just have some questions.”

I opened the door, saying, “We have an appointment in ten minutes.”

He entered, flicked his eyes to me, sizing me up without showing he was sizing me up. He had an air about him that wasn’t just some flunky following a missed question from earlier.

He said, “Yes, I know. You’re going to the church to survey the Roman excavations. I’ll be quick.”

I said, “How did you know that?”

He walked down the hall, ignoring my real question, saying, “It’s my job to know. I’m a detective.”

I followed him, seeing Jennifer give me a questioning glance. I shrugged and pointed at him. He took a seat, crossed his legs, then saw my curiosity about his knowledge of our meeting. He said, “Okay, I talked to the officers

that were here before coming up.”

I nodded, remembering I’d discussed the meeting with the earlier policemen. He continued, “You want to tell me what happened here last night?”

I said, “We’ve already done that to about a thousand cops. Why are you here?”

“I work for an organized crime taskforce in Naples. The people who died here tonight are not ‘break into a hotel for some jewelry’ types. They’re enforcers. They work for a guy named Lorenzo Salvatore. He’s a boss in organized crime with a veneer of respectability in society.”

I looked at Jennifer, then back at him, saying, “What does that have to do with us?”

“That’s why I’m here. What, in fact, does it have to do with you?”

“Nothing. We’re here on our honeymoon. That’s all.”

He pulled out a photograph and placed it in front of me. Clearly a screengrab from a restaurant’s surveillance camera, it showed a couple of older men sitting with the two pipe-hitters who had broken into our hotel room. He said, “Do you know them?”

“Never seen them. Who are they?”

“A couple of Americans here in town. I don’t know who they are, but they met the same gentlemen you did tonight, although their meeting was a little more amicable.”

I passed the picture to Jennifer, and she shook her head. Amena leaned over and said, “That guy was in the art gallery with us yesterday.”

I said, “Are you sure? That’s the same guy?”

“Yeah. He was even wearing the same clothes.”

Luca said, “What gallery?”

“Just a gallery down near the beach. We didn’t plan to go there. It wasn’t a destination. We just saw it and went in.”

Luca said, “So this guy was either following you, or this is another coincidence. They seem to be piling up, like the men here tonight.”

I raised my hands and said, “Look, I have no idea why those men would break into our hotel. We didn’t do anything but look at some pictures in an art gallery. We’re lucky to be alive, and we’re going home now because of it.”

He plucked something off of his leg, looked at it, then flicked it aside, as if he were killing time. He came back to me and said, “You *are* lucky to be

alive. The two who died are killers. I suspect between them they've murdered over a dozen people. They solve Salvatore's problems permanently, which means they believed you were a problem. Why is that?"

"We literally have no idea. Like I told the police earlier, we had a little bit of a tiff with them at the White Grotto, but it wasn't violent. I saw them again at La Sponda last night sitting across the room, but thought it was a coincidence. Now I believe they were stalking us, thinking we were rich or something."

I waited for him to respond. He did not. I said, "So, what do *you* think?"

"I think you're not telling me everything."

"Why? What did I say that doesn't jibe with what happened?"

"Well, I'm wondering how a family on vacation in Positano—one that's ostensibly here to look at a church—could kill two of Salvatore's most skilled hit men. How is that?"

I looked at Jennifer again, then said, "I don't know what you mean. We got lucky. We were in a fight for our lives."

He followed my gaze to Jennifer, then came back to me, saying, "As you Americans say, that's bullshit. If these guys came in to kill you, you'd be dead—which, given the weapons and the fact that they had studied the lock enough to know how to break in, tells me that's what they intended. You're not dead. Why is that?"

He knew more about those guys than he was letting on, and he suspected me of being involved in whatever it was. At that point, my SERE training kicked in: *Do not try to outwit the interrogator. Revert to delaying tactics. Stall. Stall. Stall.*

I said, "I told you, we were lucky. That's all. I don't know what they wanted, but all we want is to go home."

He smiled and said, "Lucky, huh? One chased your wife off a roof, and while she managed to stay on it, hanging by a single arm, he ended up three stories below in a mush of brains. And you somehow managed to disarm a trained assassin while simultaneously tripping him so he broke his neck. Pretty damn lucky, you're right."

I said, "I don't know what to tell you but the truth."

"Does your wife do a lot of roof-hopping at an archeological research firm?"

"What's that mean?"

"It means that the leap from your balcony to the roof next door would be a

miracle for some of our own circus performers. And you causing that guy to trip just so, where his neck hammered the bed frame while holding a pistol, is beyond the realm of possible.”

“What do you want me to say? It’s the truth.”

He stood up and said, “I believe it’s the truth. I don’t doubt the veracity of what occurred. What I don’t believe is that you’re simply lucky.”

I nodded, then said, “So, what’s that mean?”

He stood up and handed me a card, saying, “If what you’re telling me is true, then you’re okay. But if you’re not, then you’re a target, and Salvatore will not quit. If you change your mind, give me a call.”

I took the card and showed him to the door, saying, “All we wanted was a vacation, but I’ll take your words under advisement. My wife already wants to leave.”

He exited through the door, then said, “Being in the United States won’t protect you. If you’ve crossed him somehow, his reach is long. Think about that.”

I closed the door and went back into the bedroom. Amena said, “You didn’t tell him about the picture in the grotto.”

I said, “I didn’t want to cause more confusion. Let’s just go meet the museum people, then pack up and get out of here.”

Jennifer said, “What if he’s right? What if that Salvatore guy chases us?”

“Why? Why would he do that? What the hell did we do?”

Amena said, “We saw that painting. And then we saw it again in the gallery.”

Chapter 11

Sitting on a bench outside a laundromat on the upper road from Villa Magia, Miles watched the two body bags being laboriously hauled up the stairs. He said, “I can’t believe those goons actually killed them.”

Buck watched the bodies get loaded into a van, saying, “I wonder if they killed the child, too. That would be pretty shitty.”

“We need to get out of here before we get roped into the investigation for this mess.”

Buck looked at his watch and said, “We need to get paid first. Come on. Let’s get down to the bottom and meet the Guidos. We’ve fulfilled our end of the bargain.”

He flagged down a cab, saying, “But I’m not walking those damn stairs one more time.”

They piled in, then took the road to the bottom, with Miles saying, “How are we supposed to be paid? Don’t tell me they’re bringing a suitcase full of cash.”

Buck laughed and said, “No, of course not. It’s a wire transfer into a bank account I set up. The same one they used to ship the painting over here.”

He saw the driver flick his eyes in the rearview mirror and Buck shook his head, telling Miles to be quiet. The cab wound through the narrow roads, passing a rare parking deck hanging out over a draw that sank for a hundred feet to a creek below. The cab slowed at a church, the driver saying in halting English, “Walk from here,” and pointed to an alley that led further down. Buck paid him and they exited, with Miles saying, “Going to the same coffee shop as before?”

“Yep. Same time, same place.”

The crowds were sparse at this hour of the morning, the majority of stores still closed and the few people in the town headed to the dock for a ferry. They wound around the stone alleys until they reached the coffee shop they'd used the day before, Buck looking around but not seeing Guido One or Guido Two. Only a couple of college kids and a table with three businessmen in suits appearing completely out of place.

He said, "Guess we got here first. Let's grab a seat in the back."

They sat down in a booth facing the door, and Buck saw the three businessmen stand up. Buck realized his earlier assessment had been wrong, as one of the men was an older gentleman with white hair and a cane, while the other two were much younger, and much larger, wearing sunglasses even at this early hour. It was a businessman and his security handlers. Probably someone who owned a yacht in the harbor.

To his surprise, they approached his booth. The older man stopped, looked at his security, then said, "You two stand up, please."

And Buck realized who it was. The fabled Mr. Lorenzo Salvatore. Miles said, "Wait, what? I ain't standing up for you."

Buck elbowed him in the gut, drawing a gasp. He hissed, "It's Salvatore. Stand the fuck up before they kill us right here."

In short order they were both searched for weapons, the men acting with a professional demeanor. There was none of the bluster they'd had from the Guidos. It was simply a job, and they were good at their job. The men nodded at Salvatore, and he waved at Buck and Miles to sit back down. He slid into the opposite side, with one of the security joining him, and the other joining Buck's bench.

Buck said, "Mr. Salvatore, I'm honored to meet you. I thought I was here to meet your other contacts that we talked to yesterday. They said I'd get paid here today, but I want it known that I want nothing to do with the killings they did last night. I did the painting thing, you have the painting, and that's it. I don't want to be involved in your business."

Salvatore bored his eyes into Buck's, and Buck retreated, saying, "I didn't mean to insult you . . . I didn't mean I don't want the money or anything. I was happy to help with the painting . . . I just mean I don't want to be involved in any killings."

Buck looked at the security men, saw nothing because of the sunglasses, then returned to Salvatore, saying, "I'm sure those two deserved to die . . . I just don't want to be involved. I do art fraud, not organized crime rubouts."

Salvatore scratched his nose, then said, "Who do you think was killed last night?"

Buck glanced at Miles, then at the security men, and said, "Well . . . those two people I saw with the painting in the gallery. The ones I called about. I saw their bodies put into a van today."

Salvatore glared at him, then said, "Those two bodies were my men. The people in the hotel are still alive."

Buck was flabbergasted. He said, "Wait, what? I . . . I . . ."

Salvatore cut him off, saying, "You two idiots put someone on my ass that I do not need. I don't know what sloppy things you did, but it is severely impacting my ability to operate. If they know about the forgery, and are working with the police, they have an opportunity to destroy me, much like your Al Capone. You know him, yes?"

Buck nodded and said, "Yes. They brought him down with tax fraud instead of what he was really doing."

"It's the same here. You brought me this painting, and now it's going to be the death of my business because you also brought those people here."

Miles spoke for the first time. "Sir, I was in their hotel room. They aren't the police. They're nothing. There was nothing there that indicated they were anything other than tourists."

Salvatore snapped to him and said, "Nothing other than that they managed to kill two of my best men. A man and wife from America on their honeymoon? *They* killed my men? Of course there's nothing in the hotel room to indicate anything, because they're professionals."

Buck took that in, drew up his courage, then said, "We had no idea. All we want is the money we're owed. We made the forgery and brought the painting just like you asked."

"The terms of our agreement were no compromises. The painting could not be traced back to me. And it clearly has been."

"What do you want?"

"I want to eliminate the threat before it is found. They're Americans, but they're not working with the Italian police. I've made inquiries with my contacts, and nobody knows anything about them, which means they're coming from your end."

Buck protested, "Wait, that's bullshit. Nobody in the United States had any idea I'd found that painting. This isn't me."

"Well, it is now. You will help me learn what they know, and then I can

deal with it. Right now I'm in the dark. I need to know what they know."

"How are we going to do that?"

"I've done my due diligence on them. They own an archeological consulting firm called Grolier Recovery Services, but that's probably a lie. It's a cover to get them here to follow you. To keep the lie going, they're going to see the new Roman excavations, and they have a meeting this morning, which is perfect for us."

"Perfect how?"

"They'll be in the bowels underneath the church, all by themselves, completely alone."

"Yeah? So what? I'm not going to kill them down there, if that's what you're thinking. Number one, I'm not a killer. That's not what I do. Number two, you just told me they killed your best guys. I'm not going up against that. I don't care if it's in a jail cell with them handcuffed to a chair."

Salvatore gave a little smile and said, "Can you handle the child? Is that outside of your feeble skills?"

Buck shifted in the booth, not liking where this was going. He said, "What does that mean?"

"When they go under the church, my two men here will follow you. Don't worry, they'll do all the hard work. All you have to do is take the child."

"Take her where? What for?"

"I'm due to receive an award at the art gallery at eleven today. A small token for my contribution to the Caravaggio exhibit. I'll be attending that with the two Americans. You will make that happen. I need them compliant, and if you have their child, they will be. Can you handle that?"

Buck looked at Miles, then said, "Yeah, we can do that, but why? What are you going to do with her?"

"No harm, I promise. I just want her as leverage. I'll do the reception, receive custody of the painting, and then I'll deal with the Americans—away from here, back in Naples. When I'm done at the gallery, I'll meet you at the vehicle with the girl. You'll get paid, and you can leave the rest to me."

Buck felt his palms sweat, not liking what he was hearing. Not wanting to be part of kidnapping a child. He said, "You give me your word you aren't going to hurt her? I'll just watch her for an hour?"

"Yes, of course. I don't want any more investigation on the matter than you do. There is no reason to eliminate her or the other Americans."

He said it with such sincerity that Buck almost believed him, but deep in

his heart, he knew that Salvatore had every reason to eliminate them. Get rid of the thread to his culpability with the painting. But he chose to believe anyway.

“Where is this car?”

“It’s a van, actually, and it’s at a parking deck on the way out of town, about a ten-minute walk from here.” Salvatore flicked his head to one of his men, and a key fob was passed across the table.

“You just keep her there for a few hours, and we’ll meet you. My men will take her off your hands, and you’ll get your money.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

“Besides not getting paid, you’ll be two more people in the van, only instead of being in a seat, you’ll be in back with duct tape over your mouth.”

Chapter 12

Our walk down the stairs—which most likely would be our last—wasn't nearly as frolicking as the other ones had been, with each of us subdued over the events of the night before. That, coupled with the lack of sleep, had put a damper on today's activities to say the least.

Amena seemed unsure of what to make of the events, which was unlike her. She kept looking up, first at me, then at Jennifer. Eventually, she settled for slipping her hand into mine.

Jennifer said, "What do you think is going on? I mean, this is crazy even for you."

I said, "I have no idea. You know what I think about coincidences, but honestly, this might be one. I think they mistook us for something we're not and tried to short out the problem. It all came from that altercation at the White Grotto."

"Why would that matter?"

"I don't know, but I think they thought we were doing something to cut into their business and were going to interrogate us for information before killing us. If we had information, they'd get it. If we didn't, we were now a loose end to clean up."

Amena said, "It's the paintings. That's what it is."

"That *Taking of Christ* painting? Why on earth would that matter?"

"I don't know, but that's what it is. We saw that painting in the cave, and then the two bad men. We saw the same painting in the gallery, and that guy in the picture with the bad men in the restaurant was with us in the gallery. That's it. That's the common denominator. That painting."

While I still wanted to think it was because we'd encroached on someone's

drug den with that cave look, I couldn't see any other reason. It *was* the common denominator. "Well, let's just meet these people, be polite, and we can go on home if that's what you guys want."

Jennifer said, "We're flying out of Naples."

"Yeah?"

"That's where the investigator said the mob boss lives."

We reached the bottom of the stairs, and I chuckled, saying, "That guy isn't going to be tracking us."

We wound through the cobblestone streets until we reached the entrance to the old Roman excavations, a little sloping alley that looked more like a tunnel ending at a glass door. At the bottom was a woman who appeared to be a college student holding a clipboard. I said, "That's it? That's who we're meeting?"

Jennifer said, "That's what the guy who chased me last night thought."

I laughed and said, "Touché."

We walked down the ramp and the young woman said, "Nephilim Logan?"

Her English was impeccable, with only a hint of an accent. I smiled and said, "Yes, but call me Pike."

She said, "I'm Bianca, and I was told to show you the work we're doing down below. You have a company that does the same thing, yes?"

I said, "Yep. I appreciate the courtesy. This is Jennifer and my daughter, Amena."

She looked at Amena and said, "You like this sort of thing?"

Amena said, "I don't know. I've never seen one."

Bianca laughed and I said, "Hey, no offense, but . . . what's your job?"

I saw the aggravation immediately. She knew why I was asking. She looked at Jennifer to see if she felt the same way, and Jennifer said, "Don't pay attention to him. He has no social graces. We appreciate you letting us visit."

Bianca smiled and said, "Well, if you must know, I'm the project manager on this dig. I got the job after a dig in Israel, which was after I received my master's degree from Cornell."

She looked at me, then drove in the knife. "It's a school in New York. You probably haven't heard about it because they don't have a big football team."

Jennifer laughed, and I said, "Okay, okay. Just wanted to make sure we weren't following a tour guide paying for tuition. I said 'no offense.'"

She smiled back and said, "None taken. I'm used to it."

Jennifer said, “Trust me, so am I.”

And they bonded like they’d been in a sorority together for a decade. She opened the door, letting us in. We wound down a stairwell with Bianca describing the ongoing work, then went to the left, into a room that had an excavation surrounded by glass floors to watch the work. I heard the door above us open again, and she said, “Hang on. I should have locked that after we entered. Nobody’s allowed in here at this time.”

She disappeared from view, going back up the stairs, and I looked at Jennifer, saying, “Sorry about that, but if we want to claim it on our taxes, it can’t be a tour guide.”

She grinned, saying, “I know, and as usual, you being an ass has left me being the hero. She loves me.”

I heard footsteps coming back down and saw two men in business suits, but no Bianca. Both were young, but their eyes showed a history that belied their years. I’d seen that knowledge in young men once before. In Iraq.

I said, “Hey, are you guys with the excavation?”

One of them said, “No. We’d like you to follow us for a conversation. There is a man who wishes to talk.”

I immediately knew who they were. I said, “No. That’s not going to happen. Where’s Bianca?”

He pulled out a pistol—a small Walther PPK—and did nothing but show it. He didn’t even point it my way. He said, “She’s upstairs, and she said to tell you the tour is over.”

He was supremely confident, and I knew instinctively that he’d done this before. The men we’d met last night were enforcers, but this guy was the first team. He was a pure killer. I thought about trying to take him, but I knew the man behind him was armed as well, and I’d just end up getting everyone I loved killed.

I held up my hands and said, “Okay, okay. I’m not looking to get harmed.”

He said, “That’s good, because we’re not looking to harm you. We only have some questions. Let’s go.”

The first guy started walking, and the one with the pistol waited until we were on the stairs before following. We reached the top, and I saw the two grizzled Americans from the surveillance tape, both looking like they were about to be sick. To their left, on the floor, was Bianca, unconscious and tied up, with a strip of tape over her mouth.

The man with the gun saw my reaction and said, “Don’t worry about her.

When the tourists come, they'll find her, no worse for wear. We didn't harm her."

One of the grizzled Americans said, "Hey, we didn't agree to this. We didn't agree to drugging people or tying them up."

Pistol man said, "What did you think would happen? Take the girl."

He stepped forward and I realized they meant Amena, which was a redline. I looked at him and said, "You touch her, and you're dead."

I turned to the man with the pistol and said, "She's not going anywhere. We'll all go."

"I'm sorry, but she's our leverage. When she's removed from your care, you will listen to us. I promise we will do nothing to harm her as long as you comply. Think about it before you do something stupid."

I looked at Jennifer, wondering if she could take the other guy before he could draw his pistol. I didn't think I could reach the one holding it out in the open. He was skilled, and didn't do anything as stupid as put the barrel within my arm's reach. He stood off, knowing the whole point of a gun was killing from a distance.

Jennifer shook her head, her eyes telling me to buy time. But the cost was just too much.

I turned to him with venom leaking out and said, "If you take her, I won't know if she's okay. I can't allow that to happen."

He saw my eyes and chuckled, saying, "So, it's true. You aren't here just on vacation. You're something else."

He flicked the gun to one of the Americans and said, "Take her."

I put Amena behind my back and said, "No. She's not going."

He looked at me and said, "Do you want to die here, right now?"

I locked eyes with him and said, "If that's what it takes, but I promise, I won't be the only one dead."

The second man drew his pistol and Jennifer said, "Wait, wait . . ."

She turned to me and said one word, "Time."

And I knew exactly what she meant. I wanted to attack things head-on, destroying the threat in front of me. She was telling me to give us a chance. We couldn't win in a stairwell with two men holding guns. And she was right.

I released Amena's hand and said, "Follow those men. I'll be with you soon."

It literally destroyed my heart to see her walk up the stairs, looking back at

me like I'd abandoned her. When they were gone, I turned to the man below me with the pistol and said, "If she's harmed in any way, I will kill you."

He said, "I've heard that a lot in my life. It never seems to come to pass."

He waved his pistol at me to start walking and I said, "Same thing your two friends said last night, right before I slaughtered them."

And for the first time I saw a bit of hesitation in his eyes, wondering if I was more skilled at killing than he was.

Which was the truth.

Chapter 13

Amena walked outside of the church holding the hand of the older American, not because she wanted to, but because he insisted on it. They went back to the upper road for the town and started walking past the shops and restaurants. She thought about screaming for help, but didn't, because she'd been told any activity on her part would ensure the death of her parents.

She'd already lost her real parents years ago and blamed herself for the killings. She wouldn't do that again. What she needed to do was escape, without causing the ruckus of a police response. Something she'd done in an earlier life, when she was stealing for food. Something she was good at.

She reverted to the "I'm just a child" persona that she'd used many, many times before, saying, "What are we doing? Why are you taking me away? Why did those men have guns? Where are my parents?"

The man leading her said, "We're just going to keep you for a couple of hours, and then you'll see them again. We'll get some ice cream together."

She couldn't believe the statement. It was idiotic, but he seemed to think it would calm her, and so she pretended it did.

"What kind of ice cream can I get?"

"Whatever you want. I promise."

She smiled, not letting on that she knew it was a lie.

They walked up the road above the church until they reached a multilevel parking garage that stretched out down to the valley below. The men led her into the heart of the deck, down to the third floor, next to a bunch of other cars that looked like they'd been there for months, and unlocked a van, sliding the door open.

The older man said, "Get in. It won't take too long."

She did, taking a seat on a bench in the back, the two men taking seats opposite her. They sat down awkwardly, not sure what to do, and she realized that their taking of her wasn't something they were used to. Something she could use to her advantage.

They sat self-consciously for a moment, and she stood up. The older man said, "Hey, stop that. If you want to move, ask first, or I'll have to restrain you."

Which told her they didn't know what they were doing. She should have been restrained immediately. But she was not.

The younger of the two said, "I have to ask, as long as we're here, how did you know that painting was a forgery?"

Forgery? What is he talking about?

She was not stupid enough to let on about that, of course.

She took a stab in the dark, saying, "When I saw that painting in the White Grotto, I knew it was a forgery. As soon as I saw it."

She got a look of confusion, and then he responded, "That one was the real one."

The other man said, "Shut up, Miles."

Miles said, "Come on, Buck. I'd like to know. I put a lot of time into that painting, and some child took one look at it and knew it was fake?"

She said, "I didn't know it was fake. I just assumed it was, because I saw it in the gallery after I saw it in the cave."

Buck said, "Well, you were close. The one in the cave was the real one. The one in the gallery is fake. So now you know."

She nodded and said, "Why the big deal? Why did you take my parents?"

They said nothing, leaning back into the van wall. She said, "We're going to be okay, right? When they find out that my parents don't care about the painting? Right?"

Buck said, "Right. That's what will happen. Your parents will talk to a guy, and we'll let you go."

She could tell that he believed it, but she knew it wasn't true. He wanted to believe to salve his soul. He didn't want to be a part of this, but he was. And now it was time to prevent what they didn't want to happen.

She said, "I have to go potty. Can I do that?"

Buck looked at Miles, and Miles shrugged, saying, "There's a public restroom on the second deck."

Buck said, "Okay, but we go to the van first, then walk straight there, and

straight back.”

She nodded, drawing her courage.

Chapter 14

I walked out of the excavation wanting to scream. I was so full of adrenaline that I was about to burst, but if I did anything, they'd kill Amena. Which is exactly why they'd taken her.

To keep me under control.

I still had no idea what the fuck was going on, but at least I had Jennifer. They treated me like the killer I was, making sure I couldn't do anything to interrupt their plans, but they treated her like a lost female, not realizing she held the same skills that I did.

And she knew it.

She kept glancing at me, telling me that if I wanted to start bringing the death, she was willing, but I didn't have the chance. They were more than willing to kill me, and let me know it.

We wound around the small cobblestone streets and narrow alleys until we ended up at the same gallery we'd been at the day before, only now it was invite-only.

The first suit guy showed a lanyard pass, and we were let in, seeing a crowd of people all sipping wine and listening to a man at a microphone. The goons led us to the back, to an older gentleman with a mustache and an impeccable suit.

He said, "Hello. I'm sorry for the violent tactics, but I have to know what you know."

I looked around at the wealth in the room, then went back to him, saying, "You just took my daughter. Don't think I won't break up this thing."

He smiled and said, "I understand your reticence. I truly do. But understand, nothing you do here will prevent her death. It's pre-programmed

to control you. That's the point. If you attempt to spoil what we have planned, she dies."

And he was exactly right. I felt the adrenaline build like a seismic jolt, but there was nothing I could do. I said, "So, what do you want? What will it take to get my daughter back?"

"I want to know how you knew that painting was a fake."

He pointed at *The Taking of Christ*.

Exasperated, I exploded, saying, "I didn't know it was a fake until you just told me. I'm here on my honeymoon. That's all we're doing. That's it."

Some people in the crowd jerked their heads to us, and he said, "Shhh. Not so loud. I'll ask again, how did you know that was a fake?"

I drew into myself, looking for a way out, seeing the one goon to my left, and the other goon right next to Jennifer. I knew I could get out of this problem set by killing all of them, but I didn't know where Amena was.

Which he knew as well.

I said, "Sir, I honestly don't know what you're saying. I have no idea about any paintings."

Someone else took the microphone and started talking, and he turned to me, saying, "I have to get my award for my painting. I'll be back."

I looked at Jennifer, trying to find a way out, and then it entered.

Amena came darting in, screaming her head off.

Chapter 15

Amena repeated her request to use the bathroom and the older guy, Miles, stood up, saying, "I'll take her."

Amena waited on the older one. He considered for a moment, and she said, "I don't want to pee here in the van. Please."

He finally nodded, saying, "We'll all go," and slid open the van door. They went up one level and the younger man pointed at a door, saying, "That's the bathroom."

Amena slipped her hand out of the older man's and began walking. She went ten feet, and then started sprinting toward the stairs. She heard the man behind her shout, but kept going.

She reached the street, unsure of what to do, looking for a policeman or some other authority figure, and saw nothing. Just tourists walking about.

She thought about grabbing one, demanding their attention, and then remembered her parents. If she created a scene here, they might get killed just to cover it up. She looked behind her and saw the men coming up the stairs. She could hear their labored breathing even as they shouted at her to stop.

She would have no problem outdistancing them.

She started sprinting, her long legs pounding the pavement, her hair flying behind her, running to the one focal point she knew: the gallery where her parents were.

She heard the men's thumping feet and picked up the pace, leaving behind their cursing and coughing.

She went down one wrong alley, reached a dead end, and realized she'd gone lower than she'd intended. She turned around and saw the men about fifty meters away. The mistake turned out to be a blessing, because she leapt

to a set of stairs and started sprinting, hearing the men behind her curse, their panting breath telling her they would never catch up.

She leapt up the steps, took a look around, recognized where she was, and started running to the right, toward the gallery.

She found the same street her family had trod the day before, saw the courtyard, then the door. She tried to enter, but was stopped by security outside.

She looked behind her, seeing her captors crest the stairs a hundred meters away. She said, "My parents are in there. Please, let me in."

The guard was unmoved by her plea, saying, "I'm sorry. Invitation only."

She glanced back, saw the men closing in on her and said, "Please! Let me in!"

"No, child. Go away."

She glanced back one more time, saw the two men less than twenty meters away, and snapped to the guard on the door. She cocked her leg and swung her foot with all her might, hammering him right in the crotch. His eyes popped open comically, his breath exhaling as if she'd punctured a balloon, and he sagged to the ground.

She ran inside.

Chapter 16

The man to my right kept his pistol hidden, but also kept it pressed into my chest. I was praying for a miracle to appear to give us a way out, and saw a commotion at the door. I turned to it, along with the men holding guns, and Amena appeared, ducking under a waiter and looking wildly around.

One of the staff tried to snatch her collar, and she dodged him, still moving, and still looking for me. Salvatore said, "Get her under control," and the man to my left pulled the pistol away, which was a big mistake.

I shouted, "Jennifer, now!" And slapped my hands on the pistol of the man guarding me. He immediately reacted, whirling back to me with a hard right cross aimed at my head. I ducked it, still controlling his arm with the pistol, and his fist bounced off my shoulder before hitting me in the jaw.

It jarred me, but the weapon was the issue. I snapped my hands to the left, trapping his wrist joint by using the pistol itself, hearing a satisfying pop. The man screamed and I let go of the arm, the pistol falling to the floor. He jumped at me, wrapping me in a bear hug, something I wanted.

I took his momentum and threw myself backwards, rotating until he was underneath me. We hit the floor hard, with him taking the brunt of my two hundred pounds on top of him. He tried to fight back and I grabbed his head by the hair. There was a brief pause in time, him looking at me and me holding his fate.

I snarled, "I told you not to fuck with my family."

His eyes went wide and I drove his skull into the stone floor as hard as I could.

I jumped to my feet, seeing Jennifer locked in her own battle.

She was punching her guy in the face with rapid blows and dancing out of

his grasp, and he grew tired of the competition, deciding to use his mass to end the fight. He screamed and barreled in, grabbed her, lifted her up, and threw her against the wall, slamming her hard enough to leave a dent in the Sheetrock.

She bounced against it, fell to the floor, and he finally pulled out his pistol, aiming it at her head. I screamed and launched myself at him. He whirled, focusing on me, and I knew I was about to get shot.

His head exploded in a mist of red, and everyone in the room began to panic, the patrons all shouting and running. Confused, I watched men in uniform begin to pour into the gallery, all armed and all screaming. I raised my hands and waited.

Jennifer stood up, her hands also raised, and looked at me. I shrugged, telling her this was just one more event in our screwed-up honeymoon, and Amena came running over, grabbing my waist.

I tousled her hair, saying, “Man, am I glad to see you.”

She smiled and said, “Not more than me. I promise.”

The room calmed down, and although I didn’t understand the Italian, apparently we were in good hands. Or maybe not. But at least we weren’t getting shot at.

It’s all about perspective.

Standing next to me, his own hands in the air, Salvatore said, “It would be good if you worked with me on this. My reach is long.”

Amena scowled and said, “He took me to a van. He was going to kill me after he killed you.”

The officers were still getting control over the room, and this was my only chance. I looked at him and said, “If I help you, will you leave me alone?”

He said, “Of course.”

I looked at Amena, and saw her shock at my words. I put my hand on her cheek, smiled, and said to him, “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have threatened my family.”

He said, “What?”

I turned to him and said, “It’s difficult to realize that you bleed just like the people you kill, isn’t it?”

He started to say something else, and I snapped my hips, driving my fist into his face like I was trying to punch the wall behind it.

He collapsed on the ground, and then Luca appeared, walking through the officers to me.

I said, "Good to see you. I mean it."

He smiled and said, "We'll see about that. You might change your mind."

"Not as long as I'm breathing. Which I wouldn't be six seconds ago."

He surveyed the room, the two killers in suits now under control, Jennifer looking at me. I smiled at her, and she just shook her head. The patrons in the room all wondered what was happening.

Luca said, "So, why did you meet him today? What were you going to do?"

I realized he still thought we were culpable in whatever Salvatore had going on. I said, "I didn't 'meet him.' He kidnapped us. And I still don't know why."

Luca nodded and said, "That's not what we saw. You two looked pretty cozy coming over here."

"So why did you come busting in? Because we were too cozy?"

He smiled and said, "Well, the fact that they pulled out pistols was something else. I'll give you that."

Two uniformed men pulled Salvatore to his feet, and he began screaming about his rights and how he would spell the end of all of them.

Luca said something in Italian, and he spit a glob right into Luca's face. Luca wiped the offensive slime off, but showed no other emotion. He turned to me and said, "So, what illegal stuff are you doing?"

I said, "I'm telling you the truth here! We went to the church and got kidnapped. Salvatore never got to the part about why."

Amena said, "I know why. It's the painting. It's fake."

Luca glanced at her. "What's that mean?"

She glanced at me, and I nodded. She said, "This painting in here is a fake. It's covering a real painting, which is worth a lot of money."

Salvatore hissed, "Shut up, you little bitch."

She looked at him and said, "My dad will punch you in the face again if you say that."

I leaned forward and he recoiled, even with the police around him. I said, "She's speaking the truth. You open your mouth again, and I'll split it apart."

Salvatore said, "I want my lawyer. This entire thing is outside of the scope of any reason for police interference."

Luca said, "Can you prove that, young lady?"

Amena went back to me, then said, "I can, but you might not like how I do it."

I said, "Go ahead."

She looked at Jennifer, who nodded to her. She hesitantly walked to one of the bar tables around the room and removed a flute of champagne. She walked to the Caravaggio *Taking of Christ* and threw it on the canvas.

Everyone in the room gasped. And then the outer painting began to melt under the alcohol of the champagne. A small blip that showed something underneath.

I looked at Jennifer and said, "Man, that was a good decision, bringing her along."

She smiled and said, "Wouldn't have come here without her."

Luca sent a uniformed guy forward, then glanced back at me, saying, "What's that about?"

I said, "I don't know, but I'm pretty sure this is an Al Capone moment."

He got the reference immediately and smiled, looking at Salvatore. He said, "Is that your painting?"

Salvatore said, "I want a lawyer."

Luca nodded and said, "That will be arranged."

He turned to me and said, "You will be required to remain here until such a time that we no longer need your assistance."

"So I can't fly home today?"

He stammered for a minute, trying to find a reason to keep us, then said, "Look, I can't make you stay. But I would appreciate it."

I said, "You paying for this? We have a hotel room at the Villa Magia."

The two men from the surveillance video made the mistake of peeking into the room from outside the door. Amena pointed at them, saying, "Those are the guys that took me."

Luca flicked his head at his men, and they were immediately arrested. He said, "So, do we have a deal?"

I said, "Do we spend the night in jail? Or in our hotel room?"

He smiled and said, "Yeah, I can keep you in the room."

I put my arm around Jennifer and said, "Then we're all yours. It's our honeymoon, after all."

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

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

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

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

Knuckles finished with my rig, then held his own arms out for me to return

the favor. I started working my way down the jumpmaster checklist, making sure his life support was good, and he said, “She really hates this shit.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She doesn’t need it.”

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

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

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

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

She’d been trained on HALO—High Altitude, Low Opening—parachute jumps, as she was a member of my cell, but she’d never liked it. And she loathed these rebluing sessions.

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

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

problem, we were often retained to help out with the job.

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

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

Roughly thirty minutes outside of Fort Bragg, and about three hours away from Charleston, South Carolina, where my company was based, it was the perfect place. Home to the United States Army’s Golden Knights and two different drop zones, with a boneyard of aircraft and a worldwide security contracting company on-site, it was the best place to do what we needed, although it had its limitations.

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

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

Knuckles pretended to check out Jennifer’s harness and said, “You good?”

She said, “I’m always good.”

He said, “That last jump didn’t work out like we wanted. This one will.”

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

The breakup had caused her concern, because, unlike a stone wall, she didn’t own her own fate. The other flyers did, and Veep had been the reason

for the breakup. He knew it, and honestly didn't care, because he was like a fish in water with a parachute, which is to say, he could have remade the linkup in five seconds if she hadn't just broken off completely and decided to go her own way.

And she knew that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Built out of the experiences after 9/11, Project Prometheus was designed to defuse the inherent fight between the intelligence agencies and the direct-action units that fought the war on terrorism at the tip of the spear. Fully created to exist outside the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution, it was a little bit sensitive, to say the least, which was why we spent so much time faking things on this airfield.

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

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

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

The lead pilot said, “Same thing tonight?”

I said, “Exactly. Same thing tonight.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She finally smiled, saying, “You’d better, because this isn’t what I signed up for.”

Knuckles came to me and said, “Check it.”

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

I heard Brett say, “This thing is not good. I wouldn’t jump it.”

I turned to him, saw his smile, and then saw Jennifer’s eyes yet again. She

said, “What’s he talking about?”

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

I heard the words, but they had no meaning to me. He was a Marine Force Recon jumpmaster. *Breasts? What the hell is he talking about?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Knuckles bounced his hand on the floor with a thumbs-up, and that was it. We were going to exit the aircraft at thirty thousand feet. Well, if we jumped up a foot on exit, that is.

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

We went out of the back of the aircraft like lemmings, all of us falling forward. I hit the air, stabilized, and immediately began looking for my

teammates, the ruck between my legs fighting me for control. I saw Jennifer and began moving toward her, working my arms and legs like little stabilizers.

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

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

We had four. Where was Knuckles?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 in 2010 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. Brad has written more than seventeen *New York Times* bestsellers and is a security consultant on asymmetric threats for various agencies. He lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with his wife and two daughters.

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