



Undercover Texas (Carder Texas Connections Series Book 4)

By Robin Perini

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His most important mission brought him to Texas—and reunited him with the son he never met...

Black ops soldier Hunter Graham knew the rules: no family, no friends, no life outside the mission. But he never anticipated a woman like Erin Jamison. Two years ago, after a mission gone wrong, he met the brilliant scientist and they shared a week of passion before he vanished back into his secret life. Now, with Erin and their son the targets of an international terrorist plot, Hunter will go against his better judgment and break every agency rule to save the family he never knew he wanted. Coming out of hiding carries consequences far beyond this assignment, but he'll do anything to keep them safe—including kidnapping them....

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Editorial Review

Review

RT Book Reviews Top Pick - 4.5 Stars - "Perini's action-packed, terrifying tale grips the reader from the first sentence and doesn't let go until the final climactic page."

About the Author

Bestselling author and Golden Heart winner Robin Perini is devoted to giving readers fast-paced, high stakes adventures infused with a poignant love story sure to melt their hearts. Her mission's motto: "when danger and romance collide, no heart is safe." She loves to interact with readers. Visit her website at www.robinperini.com.

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"We need a dead body."

"Yeah, Jimmy, we do, except we need two bodies for this job." From the passenger seat of their van, Terence Mahew scanned the suburban development they'd staked out. A lick of sweat trickled down his forehead. Blasted Florida heat. The van was hotter than some of the hellholes he'd visited courtesy of the U.S. military before he'd been drummed out.

Terence swiped his brow with a bandanna, tied the rag around his shaved head and looked over at his eager-eyed cohort. "You wanna pick the vics this time? We need a woman and a kid."

His nephew nodded, face flushed with excitement.

Yeah, Jimmy was psycho. Just the way Terence liked his accomplices. Ready for anything. No conscience in sight.

Terence propped his combat boot on the dash, slid his favorite Bowie from the leather sheath on his thigh and tested the blade. The sharp steel nicked his index finger, and a drop of blood pooled on the pad. Bored with waiting, he considered the crimson bead for a few seconds, then smeared it across his skin. Interesting how the cut oozed and then stopped so quickly. He inhaled deep and sucked the salty fluid. Sick, he knew, but he loved that coppery tang.

Since being booted out of Special Ops, Terence had missed the kill. He'd put the word out to the right people, and he'd landed a sweet gig this time. A woman and a baby. Easy pickings.

The way he looked at it, he'd been lucky. Paid to kill since he turned eighteen. Of course, now the highest bidder wrote the checks instead of the government. His next paycheck had enough zeros to take care of his mama for quite a while.

Terence flicked his thumb against the blade, drawing another dollop of blood. He'd regretted the fear in his mama's eyes when he'd given her the new car his last visit. She never asked him a question or said a word. Just gave him that look, that same skittish, knowing look as when he was a kid telling her he planned to hone his "hunting" skills in the woods near home. Well, he was all grown up and still hunting. He expected she knew it. At least his prey was a lot more fun now.

Speaking of prey, Terence had a kidnapping to plan. He scanned the upscale neighborhood's surroundings beneath a hooded gaze. His nephew might be raring to go, but too much enthusiasm made a man stupid. Jimmy boy didn't need any help in that department.

His nephew needed to be cold and calculating, no emotions. That's what made Terence the best.

"Okay, Jimmy, tell me what you see. Anything useful?"

"There are some nice houses," Jimmy ventured nervously. "Lots of trees. Grass."

"Are you *trying* to piss me off?" Even with the air conditioner blowing full force in his face, perspiration soaked the back of Terence's T-shirt. Ninety percent humidity and ninety degrees pretty much sucked as much as the kid's powers of observation.

"Listen up, you idiot. We've been following Dr. Jamison around for the past few days. Each afternoon we've been planted right in this spot, watching her. What does she do?"

"Uh...snags her kid from the car seat and cuddles him?"

"That's the hearts and roses version. We're kidnapping her. You need to identify what she does that will let us grab her and the baby. She pulls her car in right beside those great big bushes, takes the kid out and puts him on her hip, Jimmy. That means she balances all her other crap on the other arm so she has no way to defend herself."

"Do we kill the kid?"

"No." Terence had wanted to eliminate the baby, too. Easier to set up the disappearance that way. "The guy who hired us almost blew an artery when I suggested it. Apparently, his group needs Dr. Jamison alive and unhurt. They want her baby for leverage."

"Too bad."

"Yeah." Truth was, as long as the check cleared, Terence didn't care what they'd planned for the doctor or her kid. None of his business. But he'd bet she wouldn't be living in a small, peaceful suburban neighborhood with tidy green lawns anymore. From the rumors he'd heard about this terrorist group, she'd likely be held in one of the piss-poor desert countries he'd spent the past fifteen years crawling all over. The only way her kid would stay alive was if she did exactly as she was told. Terence could almost pity her, except he was too busy counting those tantalizing zeros.

He leaned his head on the seat rest and closed his eyes, envisioning the approach route to grab his quarry. Inside the house or out? Dusk? Full dark? What would be the best escape path? He wished he didn't feel like he'd missed something important.

He looked over at Jimmy. "You're sure she lives alone? No lover who's out of town or on a military assignment? She's got a kid out of wedlock, so she's no saint."

"I'll check again." Jimmy tapped his smartphone and chomped his gum, his fingers flying over the keys.

The kid's computer hacking skills were useful. Only part of his brain that worked right, but he could find out

anything about anyone.

"No husband. No lover. No baby daddy coming round. No siblings. No parents. No one will care when she disappears...except maybe the geeks at the university where she works."

"She got a gas line going into the house?"

He flipped through a couple of screens. "Yep. Stove. Perfect setup."

"If the fire is hot enough, it ought to destroy the DNA."

Jimmy drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Can I pick the people we're gonna kill now? Please."

"Okay. I guess you've earned it." Terence scratched his chest. "Remember, we need a woman *and* a child." He turned his head and met Jimmy's glassy-eyed gaze. His nephew was already imagining the kill in his mind, just as Terence used to. "So, where do we hunt?"

"Urnm...the mall?" His nephew bit his lip and sent Terence a cautious glance.

"The mall." What an idiot. "Why don't you pick the damn police station? The mall means video cameras, and the victim will likely be someone with money and ties to the community. That'll trigger a missing person's investigation. Television, newspapers." Terence glared, gripping his Bowie knife tighter. "I'm not gonna get caught 'cause you're stupid."

Jimmy swallowed so loud the gulp echoed through the van.

Yeah, the kid should be scared. The moment he screwed up, he'd disappear. Nephew or not. "Try again. This time use your brain."

Jimmy bit his lip, his brow furrowing in concentration. "A homeless shelter?"

"Not bad." Terence nodded at his nephew's hopeful expression, then slipped the knife back into its sheath. "I like it. Take us to the next county. I know just the place." He'd stayed there when he'd first been discharged. No one wanted to hire a vet with his record. He'd been at rock bottom then.

He leaned back in the van seat, satisfied how things had worked out. The ones who had looked down on him were all six feet under now. He'd made sure of that.

Just like he'd make sure that Dr. Erin Jamison and her son would disappear tonight. The whole world would believe they were dead.

Terence laughed. Before those bastards were through with her, she'd probably wish she was.

Hunter Graham paced his living room, cursing the sweltering New Orleans summers that made him feel so trapped. He'd been edgy all day, with nothing to account for it. Except maybe thinking about a trip he wanted to take, but couldn't.

He stared out the huge glass front windows. Heat rose in shimmering waves from the sidewalk and the early afternoon sun flooded his living room with glaring light and oppressive heat. What idiot came up with the

brilliant notion of lining three-quarters of the room with huge panes of glass in a state frequented by severe wind gusts, killer storms and hurricanes?

Deserts, horses and horned toads sounded better and better every stifling day he spent here. He'd have been long gone back to Texas if not for Erin Jamison and the baby.

Was she the source of his edginess?

He continued pacing like a caged animal. Erin was his weakness. He had no friends outside the company. No family. No social life. He hadn't allowed himself a bit of softness since he'd screwed up and let Erin into his heart that week. What a stupid mistake seducing her had been. She and the baby could pay for that with their lives if his enemies found out.

Cursing one last time, he walked back to the state-of-the-art gym he'd set up in his living room.

Hunter centered himself on the vinyl seat of the weight bench, shoved the barbell straight up and locked his elbows. He focused on the weight, the tension in his arms, and pushed his feet into the floor, his entire body straining. Sweat pooled on his forehead.

Slowly, he lowered the two-hundred-fifty-pound bar to his chest. Aware of each muscle, he inhaled, then pressed up with a loud exhale. His arms trembled as he slowly lowered the bar back onto its stand.

God, he hated his existence. He wanted out. He wanted a life.

He wanted Erin...and his son.

Hunter's teeth ground together and he shoved the bar up again. He had to quit wishing for things he couldn't have. It was Logan Carmichael's fault. Six months ago, Hunter had spent his so-called vacation helping the ex-CIA agent stop a royal coup and some vicious terrorists who were trying to kill Logan and his newfound family. Carmichael was now the prince—and de facto security head—of the tiny European country of Bellevaux, ruling beside his wife, an ex-Texas cowgirl turned queen.

Seeing Logan so happy with his wife, son and daughter made unfamiliar envy rip through Hunter's gut. He'd given up his right to a family when he joined General Miller's clandestine group.

A loud tone buzzed on the wall screen. Someone at the company making contact. Hunter let out another curse. He was on vacation, supposedly incommunicado from everyone and everything. He needed this time to pull himself together. Giving up on a dream didn't come easy.

Scowling, Hunter tapped the remote in his pocket. Motorized shades slid down the windows, closing out the sun. The room went dark momentarily; automatic lights came on and a large wall screen flickered to life.

Hunter snagged a towel, mopped his face and looked at the screen. Leona, his handler at the company. The woman who held his life in her hands. She'd let her hair go gray, and it looked good on her, swept away from her face. She wasn't a day over sixty, feisty as hell and an inveterate flirt. He adored her, and owed her for saving his life several times over, including on that last mind-shattering assignment. He didn't know how she'd pulled it off, but no one would have come home without her intervention.

"Hi, handsome, you are quite a sight," Leona's husky voice drawled over the video conference. "If I weren't

married and old enough to be your mother, I'd eat you for breakfast."

He tugged the towel around his neck and smiled. "If you weren't married to the man of your dreams, sweetie, I'd sweep you off to an uncharted island and we'd live happily ever after."

"If the idea of me leaving my hubby behind bothers you, we can always invite him along."

Hunter laughed. "Whoa, Leona. You're too wild for me. I don't think I can keep up."

She sighed. "Yeah, that's the story of my life...."

Hunter shot her a grin, then turned serious. "So, I know you didn't call to make Chuck jealous. What does General Miller want? He agreed to my three-week leave and—"

"Vacation's been canceled. He wants you in Kazakhstan ASAP. Another high-risk op with limited intel."

Hunter fought the cold sweat that enveloped him. His last mission for the clandestine agency had gone to hell. Limited. Right. An intelligence screwup more likely.

All Hunter knew was that when the ambush came, he hadn't reacted fast enough. He'd been injured in the firestorm, but two members of the team had taken enough shrapnel to start a scrap metal business. Both men survived, but they'd never be the same. One would never walk again.

Hunter blamed himself. Those were his men, and his instincts usually warned him of danger. He hadn't seen this one coming.

"I can't go yet. I need some time." He'd felt driven to check on Erin and his son for days. Every fiber in his being urged him to take that trip to Pensacola. Maybe instead of torturing himself by watching from afar, he should say goodbye for good.

"Look, Hunter, Miller's not the only reason I'm calling."

Hunter tensed. Leona's voice had changed, taking on a note of urgency he recognized and that never boded well. He slipped on his sweatshirt to fight his sudden chill. "What's going on?"

A shadow crossed her face. Leona stiffened suddenly, peered over her shoulder and quickly looked back at her computer. In a businesslike voice, she said, "Yes, sir, I can get that information for you."

Confused, Hunter left the weight machines and walked over to the video system. "Are you talking to me?"

Leona shook her head slightly and tapped a few keys. "I'll forward the data to your desk."

When her visitor left, she rose and shut her door. "This has to be fast. Are you alone?"

Hunter caught the strain in her voice and, for the first time, noticed the worry lines on her forehead and bracketing her tight smile. "You have my attention."

Leona leaned forward in her chair. "Remember the *personal favor* you requested of me about a year ago?"

Oh, hell, no. *Erin*. Leona had heard something.

He'd prayed this day would never come. "Yeah, I remember." Hunter's stomach clenched. "Are we secure?"

"No one listens in on my encryption. Not even the good guys." Leona tapped her keyboard, and half the screen filled with translated transmissions. "As you can see, there's been chatter about Dr. Jamison for the past few weeks."

"Weeks? Why are you just telling me now?"

"It took a while for me to identify who the references specifically meant. Besides—" Leona quirked an eyebrow "—when did you want me to tell you? When your cover was getting blown by a rogue informant or during your latest firefight?"

Hunter shoved his hand through his hair. "Point taken."

"Besides, the intel wasn't specific enough until now. Hunter, she's in trouble."

"The info is verified?"

"Affirmative, and action is imminent. According to the chatter, one of the Seattle cells is making a delivery of human cargo tonight. *Your* cargo. Both of them. Final destination—unknown."

Hunter swore. "Get me off the Kazakhstan mission. Tell General Miller I've got the flu. I died. I've lost it. Whatever will work."

"Convincing him of anything is not easy these days, Hunter. You're his go-to guy for the tougher ops, and he knows you don't break. He said—and I quote—"I want him back in the saddle fast after the last trip's *unfortunate* outcome.""

Hunter stilled. "*Unfortunate outcome*? Half the team got shot up. Drummond and O'Reilly are still in ICU at the hospital, hooked up to a million wires and life support. Yeah, that's *unfortunate*."

Anger laced every word, but guilt lay heavy on Hunter's shoulders. There was plenty of blame to go around. In hindsight, he should have seen the ambush coming. Then again, the company should have, too, and well in advance. Either someone screwed up big-time or someone was out to get them.

"I *can't* go to Kazakhstan. Not until I know Erin is safe."

"I finagled what I could. You have five days before you have to report. I've already set the contingency plan you worked out for Dr. Jamison in motion."

"You're an angel." Hunter snagged his ready bag from the closet.

"The plane is fueled and standing by. You'll be at Eglin in one hour."

"Thanks."

"I've got your back...Clay Griffin. Don't mess up." *Clay Griffin*.

An alias he hadn't used in almost two years. One he hadn't expected to hear or use ever again. Erin knew him by that name.

As Clay Griffin, he'd loved her, lied to her and left her, but it was Hunter Graham who dreamed of her every night, wishing he'd never been forced to abandon her and the child they'd conceived.

The moment he'd learned she was pregnant, he'd longed to go to her, but he had to stay away...to protect her and his son.

His efforts hadn't mattered, though. Erin's genius had put her in danger. Now he had to go to her, save her and his son, and leave them. Again.

Yeah, no doubt about it. His life pretty much sucked.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carolyn Bailey:

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