

Chapter One

Monday, December 31, 2012

10:01 p.m.

ONLY A FEW specks of light managed to penetrate the canopy of trees in the center of the cemetery. It was enough to reflect off the barrel of the Glock 19 pistol trained on Jackson Douglas, but not for him to identify the figure holding the gun or make out facial features. He saw only a rough shape, as might be formed by baggy pants and a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. That, and the unmistakable polymer barrel of the gun.

A minute ago, the gun had been in Jackson's hand. Like now, he had been unable to identify more than the general shape of the figure in front of him. Unlike now, the two of them had been separated by only a few paces, close enough that a slight moment's hesitation had cost Jackson.

Time stopped. Both of them panted for breath, staring at each other like gunfighters in an old Western. Only Jackson couldn't see the grit in his opponent's eye, and he didn't have a six-shooter strapped at his waist.

He licked his lip, tasting blood. And rain. It had been falling steadily all night, and succeeded where the light failed in making its way through the tree cover overhead. The drops that didn't fall directly through found their way onto leaves and branches, then dripped in syncopation on the road below. All around the little canopy, the rain fell with perfect rhythm, pelting the grave markers while drowning out any ambient noise.

And, perhaps, acting as a natural silencer to keep noise in.

Jackson considered his options. He was at least a dozen feet away from the gun. With it already raised and with him being stationary—even with the cloak of rainy darkness—he had no shot to rush the shrouded figure. To his right or left, he had just as much ground to cover to reach the slightest shelter. Beyond the tree line, there was nothing but open ground and small headstones. He had only one choice.

Jackson exhaled slowly. "You don't have to do this."

The gun didn't waver.

Maybe this was it. Maybe Jackson's time was up. He'd dodged a few literal bullets already. Maybe this really was the end of the line. It hadn't been a long journey, but the final few miles had been torture. Maybe he was the old, sick hound about to be put out of his misery . . .

"Are you Jackson Douglas?"

He swallowed hard, eyeing the officer. "I am."

A cloud passed over the officer's blue eyes, and Jackson's heart sank. Plummeted. A visceral growl—a death wail—rose up from within him, but he bit it off, clamping his teeth into his bottom lip. His throat constricted in a gulp, and he blinked the moisture from his eyes.

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you," the officer said.

Beside him, Hillary mouthed a quiet, "No . . ."

Jackson's heartbeats were like pile drivers. His teeth nearly drew blood as he waited for the sentence, one he hoped against hope wasn't coming.

"But your parents and brother . . ."

"No," Hillary moaned again, a little louder.

"They didn't make it," the officer said. "They're dead."

His last words came in slow motion as Jackson's legs gave out. He collapsed to his knees, oblivious to the smoke and flashing lights and voices all around him—oblivious even to the officer's crisp pant legs in front of him or Hillary in her heels at his side. He was consumed by an ache so sudden and so powerful that nothing else existed.

With a sigh, hoping Ryan maintained some modesty while she slept, Jackson reached for the doorknob. It was locked.

Jackson quickly swallowed the panic that tried to rise up into his throat.

"Ry-an!" he said, pounding the door.

Jackson stepped back and kicked the door.

The lock snapped, and the door banged open.

Ryan was under the covers, eyes closed, peaceful as could be. On the end table, next to a dimmed lamp, was her journal and an empty pill bottle.

"Oh, no."

Jackson hurried over to the side and felt for a pulse. It wasn't there.

SHOT LIST

He half carried, half dragged her onto the floor and began administering CPR. But he knew before he started that it wouldn't do any good. Her golden face had drained of color, and her body was as still as could be.

"Don't let her go!" he begged. "No!" he screamed, beating on her chest. He bent to give her breaths again, trying to will life back into her hollow frame—to bring her soul back from the brink.

"No. No, no, no, no! Do not let him have her!"

There was no response. Ryan's eyes were shut, the mystery unsolved. Her flirtatious, fun, feisty face was now a blank canvas.

Eventually, the paramedics arrived and pushed him out of the way. He heard their questions, heard Stephanie's answers, heard their futile attempts to resuscitate Ryan's lifeless body.

But all other sounds faded to the pounding in his head, a hundred whys and how comes that he knew would never have an answer.

A cell phone lay on the floor, a picture of a man on the screen. Jackson bent to look at the picture and the name above it, and that's when he saw the arm.

Slowly he stood and advanced toward the open closet door. The arm gave way to a shoulder and a head, and then the rest of a body clad in a silk robe that, like the body, was spattered in blood. Several bullet holes were clearly visible through the fabric and in the flesh above the collar. The face, drained of blood, showed panic and pain. The eyes were rolled back into the head. Wet, tangled hair was splayed in every direction—across the face, onto the floor, and over some of the wounds. Even so, Jackson had no difficulty recognizing the corpse.

It was Arielle Coal.

"Your turn," Hillary said. "I want to know what happened. How did you find me, how did you track me from Kingman to Blane and Lake Mead?"

Jackson told his story yet again, hitting the high points. When he was finished, Hillary made him pull over. She got out of the car and bent down, hands on her knees, losing her hospital breakfast. Jackson got out and joined her on her side of the car.

"I had no idea," she said.

He brushed loose hair off her cheek. "I did what I had to."

Raindrops started to fall. Big, splotchy droplets that kicked up dust as they pelted the ground. Hillary slowly turned back to Jackson. "How many?" she asked.

"How many what?"

"How many people did you have to kill to save me?"

“Twenty, give or take.”

“Oh my goodness,” Hillary said, and she sagged against the door of the car.

“But it was the only way.”

She turned and buried her head in his shoulder, and he held her for several minutes while the rain became a steady shower. Eventually, he became aware of Hillary’s body shaking, heaving in sobs. He’d never seen this reaction from her—weakness.

“How did this happen?” she asked, wiping her eyes. “How did we get here?”

Jackson swallowed, eying the black figure. “We can work this out.”

He shuffled his foot a half step forward. If he could close the gap in half, he’d have a chance to make a lunge. With some skill and a little bit of luck, he could avoid being shot altogether, or at least take a bullet in the arm or leg instead of the heart or head. Assuming the figure was a decent shot.

And capable of actually pulling the trigger.

Jackson exhaled again and took another small step, hoping the rain would muffle any sound and the darkness would obscure his tiny movement. In front of him, the figure was like granite. Like another tombstone in the graveyard.

Shaking his head ever so slightly, Jackson inched his foot forward again. “Why don’t you put the gun down? Tell me—”

The gun discharged, emitting a brilliant white flash and a deafening report. Jackson’s mind processed both the sight and sound in the instant before he felt a bullet tear into his flesh, commanding all of his brain’s attention.

He spun backwards from the blow, staggered once, and fell to the ground. His brain was pummeled by neurons that jostled for position to announce new and unheard of levels of physical pain. Despite the agony, he was aware of three things as he rolled onto his back.

His Glock had clacked on the pavement.

The shooter had darted across the cemetery lawn and disappeared into the shadows.

And the rain fell with renewed intensity and complete apathy.

Chapter Two

10:05 p.m.

JACKSON WAS PRETTY sure he wasn't going to die. The bullet had hit him in the shoulder, too high to have punctured any vital organs and too far off to the side to endanger his aorta or jugular or anything of real significance. It had not been a fatal shot.

Assuming he didn't bleed out on the cemetery road. He had no idea how long a single bullet wound to the shoulder took to drain all the blood from a human body. Or if it even would. Certainly not in the movies, where guys took bullets in the leg and arm all the time, wrapped a makeshift tourniquet around their limb, and fifteen minutes later were chasing down baddies and making out with the girl.

Making out with the girl . . .

Jackson closed his eyes as a fresh wave of pain washed over him. He'd seen no one else upon arriving at the cemetery. The shooter was gone, meaning Jackson was alone in the rain and darkness. Maybe somebody had heard the gunshot, but with the rain, with revelers shooting off firecrackers, and with the fact that it had been a single gunshot in L.A., the chances of a passerby stumbling upon him were slim.

He knew he should try to stop the bleeding by putting pressure on the wound. He raised his right arm, and the slight movement several muscles away from the wound felt like a new bullet biting into his flesh. The fabric of his T-shirt stretched, pulling across and out of the bullet hole. Jackson thought he might faint. He'd been in pain before—real pain. But nothing even close to this.

He collapsed onto his back, breathing in gasps, hoping the pain would subside slightly. He felt the rain puddling around him, soaking his clothes and hair. Fresh drops splattered down on his face. He closed his eyes against the rain, steadied his breathing, gritted his teeth, and, in a swift motion, reached his right hand across his body and pushed his palm into the wound.

He growled then screamed in pain. It infuriated him, and instead of removing his hand, he pushed harder. Neurons set world records transmitting commands to his brain, insisting he release pressure. When they overwhelmed him, he surrendered, dragging his hand back across his stomach and onto the pavement.

He rolled his head to the side, away from the wound and the rain that continued to beat down. Jackson clenched his right hand into a fist, his legs tense as he waited for endorphins to flood him and ease his anguish.

Instead, the wound throbbed, and unconsciousness tugged him toward safety. Maybe he would wake to a Good Samaritan standing over his shoulder, or to morning when a jogger or paper boy could hear his cries for help.

Or maybe he just wouldn't wake at all.

And maybe he didn't deserve to.

Jackson reached for the gun, still tucked into the back of his pants, doing a somersault into the middle of the aisle while he grabbed it. As he rolled, he clicked off the safety, and came up on his back, feet up in the air. Between his legs, he aimed at the blur of blackness that was moving. He squeezed the trigger.

Jackson had no idea how many shots he fired. He just kept pulling the trigger, varying his aim up and down, left and right, shooting anything inside the V formed by his outstretched legs.

Finally, he stopped. Slowly, shakily, he got to his knees and then his feet. His shots still echoed through the warehouse, which otherwise had gone eerily silent again. It was still dark, except for a small ray of light cast by the flashlight that was now rolling back and forth on the floor. The glow reflected off smoke hanging in the air and illuminated a growing puddle of blood on the concrete.

Gun still drawn, arm shaking, Jackson bent for the flashlight and confirmed his suspicions.

The man was dead.

Sanders appeared in the cabin stairway, gun drawn in his right hand, his left shoulder sagging and bleeding profusely. His face was gray and his eyes wide. How he was still conscious Jackson had no idea. And at the moment, no concern.

Jackson dived to the side as several shots spit into the deck of the boat. He rolled behind the galley counter and looked up to see a small fire extinguisher attached to the side of the counter. He ripped it off the hook, pulled the tab, and began spraying in the general direction of Sanders.

SHOT LIST

While Sanders was momentarily distracted, Jackson scampered around the right side of the counter and popped to his feet. He unleashed another spray of foam while running in the general direction of Sanders. When he saw him through the mist, he swung the fire extinguisher, aiming for the gangster's head. He missed, connecting instead with his shoulder. His left shoulder. His bleeding shoulder.

Sanders' howl of pain woke the valley. He fell to the deck, and Jackson slipped in the foam. He slid once before rising to his feet, again reaching for his gun. Somehow, despite the pain, Sanders had risen, his gun still in hand.

Like in the movies, the mist in the air seemed to separate, giving Jackson a clear view of his target. He squeezed the trigger, and felt the small kick as his Glock discharged.

One pull of the trigger.

Two almost simultaneous shots.

Jackson looked down to see where he had been hit, but he was clean. He looked back up as Sanders slumped to the deck, the gun falling from his lifeless hand. Jackson turned his eyes to the shore where Dylan stood, gun drawn, still slightly crouched as he aimed toward the boat.

Jackson approached the fallen drug dealer, kicked the gun away, and made sure he was indeed dead.

As a doornail.

Uttering something between a guttural growl of frustrated resignation and a war whoop, Jackson squeezed the trigger.

His first bullet tore into the man's shoulder. The second sailed wide as the guard reacted to the first and spun. Jackson shot quickly again, hitting the guard in the arm, causing him to release his weapon. He was still standing and began to charge, and Jackson shot two more times, both bullets tearing into flesh but not hitting center mass.

The man continued to charge, himself growling in pain and rage. Jackson stepped out fully from behind the building, planted himself, and took aim. He had one shot before the man was upon him, and he had no choice.

His hands were shaking, and he again missed center mass. His bullet was high, penetrating just below the neck. Blood immediately bubbled to the surface.

The man dropped to his knees, then facedown into the sand, blood gushing from his wounds.

Then the bangar was turned a stunning white, the bang reverberating in Jackson's ears. He spun around the side of the van with the rifle. It took a second to identify a target, a man crouched in the wake of the detonation. Jackson screamed viscerally as he unloaded a dozen rounds, shredding the man where he stood.

NATHAN BIRR

He stepped over Hillary and switched the gun to his left hand, looking down the driver's side of the vehicle. He saw a figure running for the corner of the hangar, and chased him there with another half dozen bullets.

Jackson walked over to Margaret Moore and placed the gun in her leg, just above the knee. Senator Moore swore at him.

"Do not make me do this," Jackson said.

Moore scowled and called him a litany of dirty words.

Jackson gritted his teeth. He was in it pretty deep. Extenuating circumstances might explain some of his actions away. He was hoping for lenience once the truth came out. But if he put a bullet in Margaret Moore, he would cross another line, beyond the reach of clemency. The court's or his own soul's.

"I shot Quinn," Jackson said. "I killed over a dozen men at the base. I drove up to your house in the burbs and took you and your guards captive. Do you really want to take the chance that I'm bluffing," he asked, "that I'll just say 'aw, shucks, you win' and hand over the gun?"

Moore stared at him intently.

"Three seconds," Jackson said, still unsure what to do if Moore called his bluff. "Two . . ." He couldn't shoot her, but if he backed down . . . "One . . ." He pushed the gun deeper into Margaret's leg, and she stifled a yelp.

"Wait!" Moore yelled.

Jackson turned the gun back on him. "Confess!"

Jackson sat in the dark, staring at nothingness on his TV. Some lame cable action hero dodging bullets in a burning building. Revulsion and apathy played to a draw, and the remote remained on the couch cushion beside him.

His eyes were glazed over; his ears unreceptive. Somewhere in the house, his phone was ringing again. It had been ringing for two days, playing the assorted ringtones assigned to his various friends. He let them play. Three messages from Sam. Two from Reggie and Leroy. One from Mouse. Six from his neighbor Connie.

And it was probably her banging on his front door.

Jackson thought again of the sedatives he knew were upstairs. All the way upstairs. Farther even than the remote.

Something on TV blew up in spectacular fashion. Debris and bodies flew everywhere. The action hero made a clichéd, vulgar gesture. Then he grinned as he walked away.

The banging on the front door had ceased, but gave way to a new, more terrifying sound. Soft clicks.

SHOT LIST

The door was thrown open, light flooding the room. Jackson closed his eyes against the assault.

"Jackson!" Connie's boisterous voice echoed through the room. "What are you doing sitting on the couch? And what is that filth you're watching?"

The hero was about to get some action of a different kind. Jackson felt for the remote and popped off the TV.

"How long have you been like this?" Connie asked.

Jackson rolled his head. "Depends," he muttered, the first words he recalled speaking that day. "It's Thursday, right?"

"I don't know what you and that young lady did in Las Vegas, but do you realize my lawn hasn't been mowed in two weeks? I don't think you can even get that old mower through it anymore. And Sabrina's due in this afternoon. I was hoping maybe you could take her out tonight instead of tomorrow? I've got a Gourmet Gala meeting, and I—"

"No," Jackson said.

Connie stopped, almost in front of him. She scowled. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean I'm not showing your niece around town."

"But you promised. I fixed your little backstory— isn't that what they call it on TV?— and you agreed to take Sabrina out. I know it's a day early and short notice, but—"

"I know what I said," Jackson replied. "But things have changed."

"Jackson, this isn't like you. Is something going on with you and . . . what was her name, Hailey?"

"What's going on is that I killed twenty people and blew up an Air Force base in Nevada, Connie! I left more collateral damage than a Lethal Weapon movie, and so I'm not really in the mood to mow your stupid lawn or show bipolar Sabrina around town or make good on any of my favors right now, okay?"

Connie stared at him with bulging brown eyes. Then she buffed and stalked toward the door, mumbling curses in Italian as she went. Jackson waited until the door slammed behind her, then hurled the remote control at the TV with a yell.

Jackson heard footsteps on the pavement. The shooter was coming back.

He tried to raise his head, tried to reach for his gun. Where was his gun?

Somebody shouted. A girl, maybe a teenage boy. Jackson couldn't decipher the words. The footsteps grew louder.

Then the rain stopped. Or just moved. He could hear it falling all around him, slapping against the tombstones and the pavement. But it wasn't falling on his face anymore.

NATHAN BIRR

Suddenly, he felt another bullet tearing through his body, in the exact same place. This one didn't pass through. It just continued to tear, like a giant knot in his shoulder, growing both tighter and bigger at the same time. Jackson wanted to scream in pain. He wanted to reach for the wound, to somehow alleviate the pressure. And he wanted to shut up the babbling voice that may or may not have been only in his head.

But he passed out before he had a chance to do anything.