

Chapter One

Tuesday, September 11, 2012

3:17 p.m.

“HI, JACKSON, IT’S Hillary McKenzie.”

He nearly dropped the phone.

Hillary.

He was dumbfounded, unable to imagine why she had called him. Their last goodbye, a year ago, had been little more than an acknowledgment of departure. No fond farewell. No best wishes. No inclination that their paths would ever cross again. Or that she wanted them to. And yet, it was her unmistakable voice in his ear.

“I need to talk to you,” the voicemail message continued. “Please return my call at this number. Otherwise, I’ll try you again later this evening.”

He stood in stunned silence for several minutes, staring out sliding glass doors at the distant ocean without seeing it. He’d heard the phone ring, but since it hadn’t sounded a familiar ringtone, it hadn’t warranted putting down his Xbox controller. Now, heart thudding in his chest, hands shaking, he replayed the message to see if Hillary had left any clues as to what she wanted. But a flood of mental images drowned out any potential insight he might have gained. Images of long, golden hair fluttering in the Southern California breeze. Of blue eyes that could look right through him. Of an explosion. Fire and smoke. Caskets.

Robotically, Jackson returned to his Xbox. The memories and images continued to plague him as he lethargically played the second half of a Rams-49ers game. They weren’t grainy and blurry like so many memories tended to be. These thoughts were vivid and razor sharp as they sliced through his brain, more than once distracting him from the game. When it mercifully ended, he put away his controller and debated returning her call.

Since they had parted ways the previous August, he had no more desire to see Hillary than she had to see him. Thoughts of her came now and then, but he quickly slammed the door on them. They were links to a previous life, one he was

trying hard to forget. Now, thanks to the voicemail, he couldn't dislodge the images planted in his mind. Of her. Of them. Of it.

He hoped some exercise and a change of scenery would clear his head, and it had been a while since he'd last cut his neighbor Connie's grass. At least he thought so. The days and weeks had started to run together of late. He had taken only two cases since the suicide of his pseudo-client Ryan a month and a half ago. Neither had paid much, and Jackson's finances were starting to run on fumes. Fortunately, whiling away the days playing *Madden* and *Call of Duty* didn't run up too hefty of a bill.

Video games were a distraction, the same way remodeling his house had been in the wake of the accident that had taken the lives of his parents and brother sixteen months ago. Killing virtual terrorists and rebuilding the once proud (Los Angeles) Rams franchise made the pain, regrets, and general disenfranchisement fade into the background. Until a memory intruded on his consciousness and made him acutely cognizant of it all again.

Jackson pushed the mower at a feverish pace, sweat blinding his vision. He couldn't stop wondering what Hillary wanted from him. There had been urgency in her voice, and yet complete and total calmness. He'd observed it before. Most people, when in want or need, lacked composure. Not Hillary. There was no uncertainty in her mind. She would get what she wanted, allowing urgency and composure to coexist in a state of absolute control.

Finished in record time, Jackson left the mower out to cool and hurried home before Connie came out to chat. He drained a glass of iced tea and went upstairs to take a cold shower, fighting thoughts that clawed their way into his brain. He stayed under the frigid water as long as he could, and emerged cooler and a little cleaner. He stared at his reflection in the mirror—the dirty blond hair that hung over his eyebrows and almost to his shoulders, the hollow blue eyes that looked more like a painting than the real thing, and the face that had almost forgotten how to smile.

He broke off his gaze and sighed. He had paid enough attention in his sessions with Dr. Zachary to know that he needed to face his problems. And he knew Hillary well enough to know she wasn't going away. Not if she wanted something. So he dressed and went downstairs, grabbing his phone and dialing her number before he talked himself out of it.

“This is Hillary.”

The voice was pure and velvety.

He cleared his throat. “Hey, Hill, it's Jackson.”

There was a slight pause before she spoke. “I’m surprised you called me back.”

“I’m a little surprised myself. What’s up?”

“I need to ask you for a favor,” she said with authority. It was not a request.

“What’s that?”

“You’re still a private investigator, correct.” Again, not a question.

Jackson paced into the dining room, raking his free hand through his damp hair. It was in stark contrast to his mouth, which was suddenly dry.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’m still a P.I.”

“Good. I have a case for you.”

“A referral?”

“Not exactly.”

Jackson turned back toward the living room. “What’s going on?”

“I have a meeting in Santa Monica tomorrow afternoon. Are you free if I stop by around five?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Jackson sat down on the edge of his coffee table. Right on his TV remote. “Agh!”

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“You do live at the same place?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at five.”

“Okay.”

Before the word was out of his mouth, she ended the call.

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Three and a half years ago . . .

Monday, May 25

12:21 p.m.

ONE OF the unwritten rules in the Douglas household was that father and sons always played a game of catch on Memorial Day. Every now and again, they’d toss a football back and forth, but usually, like today, it was a baseball. Taking advantage of a typically beautiful San Diego afternoon, Jackson and his dad

played long toss across the expanse of the backyard until Hannah Douglas emerged from the house carrying a tray of raw hamburger patties.

“All set, dear?” David Douglas asked.

“Ready when you are.”

David fired one more fastball into Jackson’s mitt and headed toward the deck. Jackson filled a glass of iced tea and sat down next to his grandpa Leroy on the glider swing.

“Grant just called,” Hannah said as she began setting the table. “They’re a few minutes out.”

David checked his watch. “Right on time. Traffic must have been good.”

“Knowing Grant they left at dawn to be safe,” Jackson said.

“How long has he been seeing this girl?” Leroy asked.

“About a month,” David answered, looking at Hannah for confirmation. She nodded.

“What about you?” Leroy asked, digging his elbow into Jackson’s ribs. “You got a girlfriend yet?”

“Nope.”

“Got any prospects?”

“As there are fish in the ocean . . .”

Leroy chuckled, scratched his head, and took a drink. Jackson followed suit, then turned his eyes toward the grill. Tongues of flame suddenly shot up, and David repositioned a few patties.

“Son, I like my burgers rare,” Leroy hollered.

David’s reply was interrupted by the shrill ring of a cordless phone.

“Good grief,” Leroy said as Hannah answered the call. “That could wake your grandmother.”

“Probably Grant letting us know he’s in the driveway,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, well, he gets his thoroughness honest.”

Hannah lowered the phone, muffling it against her shoulder. “David, it’s for you. Admiral Sullivan.”

All three Douglas men frowned.

“Jack, tend the burgers, will you?” David said as he came to take the phone from Hannah. He disappeared inside.

“I like mine—”

“Rare,” Jackson said as he stood. “I know, Grandpa.”

Careful to cook the burgers evenly—and to leave a couple rare—Jackson pondered reasons for David’s former boss at ONI to be calling. He was

interrupted when he heard car doors closing, followed by muffled voices as Grant and his new lady friend made their way around the side of the house.

Jackson was anxious to meet her, especially after Grant's sterling portrayal. Then again, he'd heard similar rave reviews from his brother before. If she bore any resemblance to Grant's previous girlfriends, she would be smart, stoic, unfunny, and mediocre at best in the looks department. Preferring substance over style was one thing. Sacrificing style for it was another. The worst part was always the "So what do you think of her?" conversation, similar to the "Wow, I've always wanted one of these" exchanges after a crummy Christmas gift.

Jackson closed the grill lid and looked up as Grant and his girlfriend appeared around the corner. Then he fumbled and nearly dropped the spatula.

Standing beside Grant was the most strikingly gorgeous female Jackson had ever seen. "Smoking hot" would have been an understatement, and far too crass to describe such beauty. She was tall—close to six feet—with a delightfully proportioned figure and creamy, flawless skin. General decency and Christian propriety notwithstanding, Jackson wouldn't have been able to help staring at her body if not for the magnificence of her oval face.

Golden hair was drawn back into a loose ponytail that glistened in the sunlight. Icy blue eyes sparkled like sapphires, and firm, ruby lips guarded perfect teeth. Her nose was small and chiseled, her cheeks high and smooth. Subtle makeup accentuated her faultless features, as did a playful silver necklace and hoop earrings. She wore a white chiffon cap-sleeved blouse and a dark denim skirt cut just above the knee, along with platform sandals that increased her height by a few inches.

"Hey, Jack," Grant said, climbing onto the deck.

"Grant," Jackson said, forcing his eyes to his brother. They shook hands as they always did.

Grant smiled. "Jack, this is Hillary."

Jackson reached out and shook a soft, smooth hand. Fighting the cotton that had suddenly taken over his mouth, he offered a quiet, "Hi."

"It's nice to meet you," Hillary said, forming a crooked little smile that sped up Jackson's heart rate. Wow. The "So what do you think of her?" conversation was quickly going to morph into a "Does she have a sister?" talk. "Or a single mom, for that matter? Distant cousin?"

"Hey, Grandpa," Grant called over Jackson's shoulder. Hillary waved at Jackson with her fingers as she and Grant moved on to greet Leroy, leaving

Jackson with a dumb look on his face and a greasy spatula in his hand. After standing there like an idiot for a moment, he scraped the burgers off the grill.

When David and Hannah emerged, introductions were made all around, and the group sat down around the picnic table in the lawn. Hannah's side dishes included potato salad, baked beans, and an array of fresh fruit and vegetables. As usual, everything looked delicious.

"So where'd you go to school, Hillary?" David asked after he had blessed the food, the nation, its troops, and the leaders of half the free world.

"UC-Santa Barbara, and then Pepperdine Law School," Hillary replied.

"*Summa cum laude*," Grant said.

"Wow, that's very impressive," Hannah said.

"At Pepperdine or UCSB?" Jackson asked.

Hillary smile demurely before answering softly. "Both."

"Wow," Hannah said again.

"And you're sure you're dating the right guy?" Jackson asked. "I mean, Grant's no dummy, but he wasn't even top of his class at UCLA."

"At least he got in. My sister's boyfriend had to go to USC."

She said it very innocently, but flicked her eyes at Jackson for just a fraction of a second. The rivalry between the two L.A. rivals was a source of contention between the Douglas brothers, and, while it was possible Hillary was unaware of Jackson's two years at Southern Cal, the fleeting glance suggested otherwise. Either way, the mention of a sister had most of Jackson's attention.

"You play any sports in school?" David asked.

Hannah groaned.

"Honest question in this family."

Hillary smiled as she sipped her ice water. "No, I get that a lot because of my height." She shook her head. "I played intramural basketball at UCSB, but that's it."

There was a brief lull in conversation while everyone sampled and complimented Hannah on the food. Grant added a, "Good burgers . . . Dad," with a sideways wink at his brother.

"A little overdone," Leroy commented, not so subtly nudging Jackson with his elbow.

"I can't help but notice you're choking it down just fine," Jackson replied.

Leroy nodded as he stuffed the last bite into his mouth. He chewed, then stifled something between a cough and a belch into his napkin, and asked, "How'd my grandson get you to agree to go out with him anyhow?" He followed

up his question with what could only be described as a dry heave. Typical old guy eating sounds.

Hillary flashed a quick smile. "He just asked."

"So what," Jackson said, "I hope they nail your client to the wall, and by the way would you like to have dinner?"

"Not exactly."

"We were both working the same case," Grant said. Then he shrugged. "Sort of. We picked up a guy for a B&E and petty theft, who turned out to be the key witness in getting her firm's client off on a string of burglary charges."

"Key witness how?"

"He was actually the culprit."

"How very *Perry Mason*."

"I was the arresting officer, she was working for CD&R, and over the course of a week or so, we got to know each other beyond the basic cop-lawyer formalities. One thing led to another . . ."

"Nothing like a couple of cat burglars to bring two people together."

Hannah elbowed Jackson in the ribs from the other side, and he returned to his hamburger.

David continued to ask profiling questions, albeit gentle ones, and Hannah apologized for him and made short work of befriending Hillary. For her part, Hillary made pleasant conversation and seemed to enjoy the would-be in-laws.

"What'd Sully want anyhow?" Jackson asked when burger number two was safely down and conversation had again lagged.

"Admiral Sullivan, you mean?" David said.

"Aye, sir."

"He wanted to know if I could come by in the morning."

"For what?" Grant asked.

"He didn't say, just that he had something important he wanted to talk about."

Grant frowned. "You've been retired for a decade."

"Probably pulling your pension," Jackson mumbled.

"Just so long as he doesn't want you to re-up," Hannah said.

"I'm too old for that, dear. They want brave, young, strapping men."

Grant grinned. "That's why you washed out, Jack."

"Ah, go kiss the cannonmaster's mother."

Leroy chuckled and nearly choked.

"Son, do you by any chance mean the gunner's daughter?" David asked.

“Whomever.”

Hannah stood up. “Dear, will you help me with dessert?”

“You’d better believe it,” he said with a goofy dad smile.

They adjourned to the house and Leroy got up to refill his tea.

“You were in the Navy?” Hillary asked.

“Army, and only technically.”

“What happened?”

“He opted out after two months,” Grant said. “Entry Level Separation.”

“How come?”

Jackson reached for a wedge of pineapple. “It just wasn’t what I was expecting.”

Grant began humming.

“Really, dude? *Story of My Life*?”

Grant shrugged. “It’s a pattern. USC, San Diego, every job you’ve ever had.”

“Well, we can’t all be blessed with a lifelong focus.”

“You two squabbling again?” Leroy asked.

“He started it,” Jackson said in a purposefully childish voice.

“Yeah, and you no doubt finished it.”

Hannah and David returned carrying generous slices of lemon meringue pie. They were slowly savored while the Douglas family got better acquainted with Hillary. When everyone was as full as could be, Hannah began to clear the table, refusing any help. Leroy ignored her and pitched in as always. Grant and David worked off their lunch with a game of catch. Jackson, feeling the effects of a pound of beef and all the sides, not to mention an extra-wide slice of pie, reclined to the glider. Hillary offered her assistance in the kitchen and, being a guest, had it refused by Hannah. So after looking around for a moment, she strode over to Jackson.

“Mind if I join you?”

He swallowed, stopped his rocking, and scooted over. “Sure.”

Hillary sat down and the aroma of her perfume swirled into Jackson’s nose. Best looking and best smelling girl he’d ever seen. For the first time, he admitted to himself that he was jealous of his brother.

Slipping off her sandals, Hillary crossed her legs at the ankle and sat back. Citing the ways in which admiring his brother’s girlfriend’s legs was immoral, Jackson tried to focus on David and Grant’s game of catch. But peripheral vision made it hard to watch two amateurs lob a baseball back and forth. So he tried another diversion.

“This thing between you and Grant serious?”

Hillary turned her head and possibly lifted her chin a fraction. She studied Jackson for a second and shook her head. “Not yet.”

“He brought you to meet the family. And you haven’t run away.”

“Not yet,” she said with a thin smile.

“Well, Grant’s playing show-off, so he must like you quite a bit.”

“And you’re playing smart aleck, so what does that mean?”

“Not so much playing as reverting to form.”

Hillary smirked. “Grant was right.”

“What?”

“That you were a wise guy.”

“You sure he didn’t say ‘wise man?’”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure.”

Jackson shrugged. “It’s not the greatest reputation, maybe, but one I can easy live up to.”

“Are you always this cavalier?”

“Are you always this subtle?”

“I’m used to dealing with hostile witnesses. I’m a lawyer.”

“Does that mean you’re billing some poor schlep to talk to me?”

Hillary just turned a placid smile toward him. “No, I’m the only one paying for this.”

Jackson looked up as Grant walked over, wiping a thin bead of sweat off his forehead. “You two friends yet?”

With just a flit of the eyes toward Jackson, Hillary smiled again and answered nonchalantly. “Not yet.”