

The Jackson MacKenzie Chronicles

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM



by
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DISCLAIMER-FICTION

Other than actual historical events and public figures, all characters and incidents portrayed in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to all who have served in every branch of the military. I write it with extreme humility. It is to honor the veterans of the United States who fought in our conflicts, both past, present, and future.

Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying. He paws in the valley and exults in his strength; he goes out to meet the weapons. He laughs at fear and is not dismayed; he does not turn back from the sword. Upon him rattle the quiver, the flashing spear, and the javelin. With fierceness and rage he swallows the ground; he cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, he says 'Aha!' He smells the battle from afar, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

JOB 39:19-25

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you to those who have believed in me. Especially Sally Berneathy.

CHAPTER 1

January 15, 1972

Phước Vinh, South Vietnam

The late midday sun beating down on him, Lt. Colonel Jackson MacKenzie walked across the packed earth of the Phước Vĩnh forward base camp. A distinctive growl broke the silence. Close enough to feel the pressure wave, a low-flying, fully laden F4 Phantom flashed over his head like a lightning bolt. Sunlight glinted off the camo-painted wings as it banked sharply west. The air exploded with the sounds of bombs and machine-gun fire. *Charlie must be close to the perimeter.* He flipped off the safety on his M16 with his finger on the trigger.

Jackson strolled into Colonel Matthew Johnson's outer office, shouldered his M16, removed his green beret, and tucked it under his belt. The colonel's aide, Captain Colin "Knuckles" White, ushered him into the inner office. He smiled at the former Golden Gloves boxer as he passed and came to attention in front of his superior officer. "Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie reporting as ordered, sir."

Colonel Johnson finished his signature before acknowledging him with a nod. "At ease."

Jackson snapped his hands behind his back and waited for further instructions.

"Take a seat, MacKenzie."

"Yes, sir." Jackson sat on the chair in front of the desk and laid his weapon on the floor.

"The Pentagon brass and the CIA have a new mission for you." Colonel Johnson drummed his fingers on the desk.

"What do they want us to do, sir?" Jackson ground his teeth together. "And why is the CIA involved?"

"I know you don't like to work for them. It's a broken record every time it comes up."

"Yeah, too many chances of getting screwed over."

"Well, this operation came directly from the Pentagon. The information on the black market art dealings came from the CIA."

"Well, sir, what's the mission?"

"The North Vietnamese government has been selling their rare artwork on the black market to finance their war efforts and replacing them with fakes. One piece went for over three million dollars in an underground auction last week." Colonel Johnson tapped a light green folder on his desk. "The brass wants your unit to recover four of the most expensive originals and replace them with counterfeits. This would deny them money and their troops needed weapons and ammo. You would save the paintings for the people of Vietnam and the lives of American troops. It could even shorten the war. The art dealers will know the canvases are reproductions, and the North won't get paid."

"They want us to what?" Jackson hit the desktop with a closed fist. "We're supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of these people."

Colonel Johnson's narrowed eyes stared over the top of his reading glasses, his forehead puckered in the center. "From your reaction, MacKenzie, you don't like the idea."

Unwilling to back down, Jackson shook his head. "No, sir, I don't. It smacks of hypocrisy."

"Your dissatisfaction and reservations are duly noted." Colonel Johnson leaned forward in his chair. "I will not tolerate insubordination." His voice became lower and louder. "You have my

permission to forward your doubts up the chain of command. You will follow the order as given or be relieved of command.”

“I may do that, sir. Will anyone else even take the mission?” He already knew the answer.

“Probably not. You were the only choice given your current track record of pulling off the impossible. You’re the best chance of it going off without a hitch as the US Army’s absolute expert in small unit tactics.”

Jackson resisted the urge to give an eye roll to his superior officer. “Sir, I don’t agree with the mission at all. However, I will follow my orders unless my doubts find the right ears in the chain of command.”

“Fair enough.” Colonel Johnson opened the folder. “Let’s go over the plan.”

Jackson flipped his chair around and sat straddle-legged across it. For the next three hours, the two men went over the operation, line by line. The more they read, the more Jackson hated the plan. *Whoever came up with this needs their screws tightened to stop their marbles from falling out.*

“Any questions, MacKenzie?”

“Not for you, sir.”

Johnson closed the folder. “Then you’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” Jackson exited the office and closed the door. In the outer office, he pointed at the typewriter next to Captain White’s desk. “Mind if I use this, Colin?”

“Nope. Help yourself.”

“Who beat your nose flat?” Jackson rolled a piece of paper onto the roller.

Colin wiggled his nose back and forth with his finger. “That bad, huh? Al ‘Tiger Cat’ Jones. He won a bronze medal in the ‘68 Olympics.”

“What happened?”

“He knocked my happy ass out in the second round when I fought him in Detroit. I’m headed to the latrine. Be back in ten.”

“Don’t let the flies carry you away.” Jackson went to work on his letter to General Thomas. He bullet-pointed every reason for his misgivings and signed his name.

Duty, Honor, Country – Those words, steeped in lore and tradition, were the motto whereby every West Point cadet patterned their lives. That honor code meant everything to Jackson. It was the direction. The North arrow toward which he pointed every day of his life. He knew the meaning behind that call to arms. To fight with courage and die with honor, all for the love of his country.

Jackson placed the letter inside an envelope with a certified copy of the orders.

Since it was time for the mail run, Colonel Johnson forwarded the entire packet via the nightly courier junket to Da Nang.

For his records, Jackson slipped the carbon copy of his letter inside a binder under his arm with the mission plan. He shouldered his M16 and glanced at his watch. The hour hand pointed at eight. *Crap, the mess hall closed thirty minutes ago. Harry will jump my ass again. Not the first time. Won’t be the last. It doesn’t affect my ability to command. I have a one hundred percent completion rate. Colonel Johnson doesn’t care how much I weigh as long as I get the job done.*

As Jackson walked around the edge of the ammo dump into a row of small steel Quonset huts, a beam of light caught his eye. He followed it. Major Harrison Russell, his executive officer, stood in the doorway of their living quarters with a flashlight in his hand.

Jackson chuckled. “You looking for me, Harry? You’re such a mother hen.” *I appreciate his insistence as my sounding board. Ever since the POW camp, I need someone to double-check my*

decisions. What did his ex-girlfriend call us? Oh yeah. The yin and yang of each other's existence. We're best friends.

"Yeah, you missed chow again." Harry pushed two chocolate candy bars into Jackson's hand. "You know what General Thomas said. Do you want to go home on forced retirement? That's going to happen if you don't follow orders."

Jackson gripped the candy bars then looked his friend square in the eyes. They were nearly the same height. "No, I don't, but I can't leave, not yet."

"We escaped that damn camp two years ago. You need to let it go." Harry ran his hands through his short brown hair. "Maybe you should go home, my friend. What Dung did to you is eating you alive. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine, Harry. Really." Jackson tore the wrapper off the candy bar with his teeth and laid the folder on the table, setting the second chocolate bar on top. Unslinging his M16, he placed it in the rack. "We have a new mission and twelve days to get ready for it. Go tell the others the briefing is at 0800 tomorrow."

"Where are we going?"

Jackson bit off a chunk of the mushy chocolate. He wiped his lips before replying. "Tomorrow. You won't believe this one. The brass has lost their minds."

"And you haven't? I've heard the words coming out of your mouth when you manage to fall asleep. Dr. Nicholson should pull the trigger on his threat to send you home. Then you can get some help and go on tour as a recruiter. General Thomas called you the living image of a Green Beret. That dark blond hair, your tan, those dimpled cheeks, and sapphire blue eyes will make you a hit with the babes in your dress uniform. Especially with that Marine Corps high and tight you're sportin' on your head."

Jackson gave Harry a bemused sneer. "Yeah, right? Like any woman would want me now. I'm okay. Go tell the others about the briefing. Since you're so worried about me, we'll meet in the mess hall for breakfast at 0730. Satisfied?"

Harry nodded in agreement. He took two steps to the door then spun around. "Yep, that way, you'll eat more than a piece of toast and drink a gallon of black coffee. I know you're committed to staying in 'Nam, but I see what it's costing you." With a two-finger salute, he turned on his heel and left the hut.

Jackson looked up from his paperwork when the door shut. *Harry's right. I should stop pulling strings to stay in 'Nam. But I have nothing to go home to except a room at the BOQ. Doesn't matter. I'm headed home after the next weigh-in. I lost a pound this week. That means forced retirement, and there's nothing I can do about it.*

Four hours later, Jackson still stared at the mission plan as he lay in his bunk under his overhead light. A dirty, stinky, wadded-up sock landed next to his head.

"Turn out the damn light. It's keeping me awake. If you don't, I'll toss your bloody colonel's ass outside. It's late. If things go according to plan tomorrow, we have a long day ahead of us. Go to bed, you knucklehead!" Harry pulled his blanket over his head.

Unable to find another reason to stay up, Jackson ate the second candy bar then surrendered to his friend's good sense and his own exhaustion. He threw the sock back at its owner and switched off the lamp beside his bunk. In the darkness, he mulled over the plan on one side of his mind while a small voice yelled at him from the other. *Don't go. Something's wrong. Tell Colonel Johnson no. I'll put myself on sick call and let Dr. Nicholson send me home.* What was he thinking? That damn POW camp was messing with his mind. His heart's throwing a red flag. *Forget it. Duty*

requires me to follow all reasonable orders, no matter how much I don't like them. This mission will save lives. That makes it important and why the brass gave it to me—again.

January 16, 1972 – 0600 hours

Reveille sounded over the base loudspeakers. Jackson rolled out of bed for his workout. A leader by example, he was fanatical about staying in shape, even if it caused most of his weight loss. He jerked the blanket off Harry's body. "Time to get up, sleepyhead."

"Ugh." Harry wiped the drool off his chin as he sat up.

"What did you say?" Jackson bent over to tie his sneakers.

"Never mind." Harry stretched his arms over his head. "You spoiled a wonderful dream. I was in bed with Tina Louise."

"Don't want to hear it. Unless you send her my way."

"Nope, she's mine. Why don't you stay here today?" Harry slipped on the sneakers next to his bunk. "I can run by myself this morning."

"Can't do it, Harry. I need to stretch my legs. You'll just have to put up with my jokes again today." Jackson tucked his dog tags under his t-shirt.



Jackson turned to run backward. "Hurry up. You're lagging behind. We've gone three miles, one to go. I'm not going to be late for a meeting I scheduled."

"Who kept whom up last night?" Harry panted with each step. "It's your fault. Turn around before you trip and break something, you nincompoop."

Jackson fell back to jog with his best friend. Fifty yards from the wooden post designated as the finish line, he sprinted ahead then clapped as Harry passed him. "You haven't changed since selection training. I'm still the champion."

"True." Harry pinched his nose. "A champion at world-class body odor. Pee-yew."

At the showers, all the stalls were full. Jackson stood in line with his towel, uniform, and shaving kit. "What's taking them so long?"

"You know it's the one place where rank doesn't matter. It's all about the hot water." Harry snapped his towel against Jackson's butt. "We get cold showers today."

"Thanks to your slow ass feet, Major Russell. We're going to be late."

"Blame yourself and your light, Colonel."

Still damp a little later, both men grabbed their rifles from their quarters then double-timed to the mess hall. They came to a sliding stop at the doors.

Jackson glanced at his watch. "Five minutes to spare. No thanks to you."

"Whatever." Harry wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Get your ass in the building." He opened the door. "Rank before beauty."

"Hmph!" Jackson slung his rifle and walked into the building. Harry let go of the door, pivoted, and fell in step at Jackson's side. They stood at the back of the line, but the lead mess cook waved them to the front.

Harry shoved his way in front of Jackson and loaded his tray down with pancakes, sausage, and eggs to go with the black coffee.

Jackson rolled his eyes. He couldn't eat that much. It would make him sicker than a dog. *I can't spend one day hunched over in the latrine or laid up in the hospital with diarrhea. There's too much to do for the upcoming mission. Dr. Nicholson will send me home.*

Nicknamed “Chief,” Sergeant First Class Dakota Blackwater was already there, wolfing down biscuits and sausage gravy from his fully loaded tray. He’d reserved the table for the rest of his unit.

The two officers carried their trays to the table and sat across from him.

Chief acknowledged their presence with a scowl and returned to his meal.

Throat parched from their little jaunt, Jackson guzzled his coffee then gawked at the food on his plate. All mixed together, it looked like a weird-colored science experiment from his high school chemistry class.

Harry jabbed at the tray with his fork. “Are you going to eat that, or do I have Chief sit on you, and I feed you like a baby, one spoonful at a time?”

Chief looked up. “Stay on him, Major Russell. The colonel’s too skinny for his own good.”

“You could sure try. But neither one of you could keep me down, and you know that.” Jackson stuck a forkful of eggs into his mouth, frowned at the bitter taste, and spit the half-cooked wad of unsalted yellow goo onto the plate. *Yuck, powdered eggs.* He pushed them aside. The pancakes looked tastier. He took a bite of the syrup-soaked, round, half-burned bread and wanted to throw up. *If I don’t try, Harry won’t leave me alone.* Instead, he drank coffee and pushed the food around the plate. *Maybe Harry won’t notice.*

Harry covered his mouth. “Ahem!”

Jackson paused, eased another bite into his mouth, and shoved the plate away. *If I eat that crap, I’ll puke and kill my image in front of all these enlisted men.*

For his next act, Harry replaced Jackson’s coffee cup with a bowl of oatmeal. In the middle of the gray goop, a spoon stood straight up.

Shaking his head, Jackson thumped the utensil with his finger. When it didn’t move, he glared at Harry, who poured milk into the bowl then added several tablespoons of sugar. Jackson didn’t take a breath as he consumed the container of gray porridge, downing it like a thick milkshake.

Once that bowl was empty, Harry shoved another one in front of him, complete with milk and sugar this time.

With his executive officer as pig-headed as him, Jackson chose the route of least resistance. He ate the second bowl without an objection, wiping the sides clean with a piece of toast.

Chief’s eyes crinkled at the corners across the table.

Harry set Jackson’s full mug on his tray. “Now you can drink your coffee.”

Staff Sergeant Michael “Mikey” Roberts sat next to Chief. “Top of the morning to ya.”

Jackson glanced at his watch. *0740, they’re ten minutes late.*

“Do I smell a Jayhawk somewhere?” Chief grumbled, then shoved a gravy-soaked biscuit into his mouth.

“Nah, that’s pony crap.” Mikey stuck out his tongue.

First Lieutenant Taylor “Ty” Carter took a seat next to Major Russell. At the same time, Captain William “Bill” Mason sat on the other side of Lt. Carter.

Jackson gave the men a hard stare. They ate with their heads down, avoiding his eyes. *After mission prep this afternoon, another one of my lectures about promptness. And a few hundred pushups. No, a thousand. They know better.*

At 0800 hours, the men adjourned to the unit meeting area—a cleared space in front of Jackson and Harry’s quarters. A makeshift table and four chairs constructed out of old wooden transport pallets stood in the center. Jackson grabbed the chair with a piece of foam to protect his butt from splinters. Harry claimed the chair with a canvas bag stuffed with hay as a seat. Bill sat on the one with a toilet seat. Ty pulled a faded-out, half-rotted canvas red camp chair from under the table.

Chief took off his shirt, folded it, then laid it on the seat of the last chair to cover the knots and broken staples before easing his big frame into it. Mikey used the only thing left—a wooden milk crate.

“Where are they sending us, JJ?” Harry tipped his chair back on two legs.

Jackson tried to remain expressionless. The mission was that ludicrous. Unable to maintain it, he rolled his eyes. “Believe it or not, Hanoi.”

Harry’s front chair legs came down with a bang. “What?”

“Why would they send us there?” Chief asked with disbelief.

Jackson held up his hand to stop all conversation. “I didn’t like it either. Let me explain the mission. According to our intelligence—” He stopped as groans came from his men. “I know, I know, it’s counterintuitive. What intelligence? These are generals we are talking about here. Let me finish, then you can chime in. The North has been selling its rare artwork on the black market to finance its combat and guerrilla operations. We are to recover four original paintings and replace them with forgeries. We’ll be saving them for the Vietnamese people and give the North Vietnamese government the finger in the process. Think of it as taking out an enemy position. That’s how Colonel Johnson pitched it to me. Not that I agree with him. But unless we get orders to the contrary, we go.”

“Okay. Let’s say the mission goes as scheduled.” Harry raked his fingers through his hair. “How are we getting into Hanoi?”

“Oh, you’re going to love this one.” Jackson leaned forward in his chair. “HALO jump at night.”

Bill banged the table with his fist. “HALO at night. Why?”

“Because at a normal jump altitude, the plane is too loud.” Jackson tapped his right ear. “A HALO gives us a fighting chance once we hit the ground. If the enemy troops hear a low-flying plane near Hanoi, we’ll be sitting ducks in our chutes for the guys on the anti-aircraft guns.” He drew his thumb slowly across his throat from ear to ear. “And dead before we hit the ground.”

Harry crossed his arms. “Okay, that makes sense. Now how do we get out? If an alarm goes off, we’ll need a quick getaway, provided the NVA doesn’t capture us first.”

Jackson snorted, stone-faced. “I’ll fly us out in a helicopter hidden by the CIA near the coast.” He stopped at the full-blown snickers. “Yeah, I know, it’s a load of crap. But, for the sake of argument, say it’s there. We should make it out of North Vietnam without any difficulty unless a patrol spots us. If that happens, plan for a fun-filled time haulin’ ass back to our lines. Since we agreed to the pact, you know my decision if we’re caught. I will not go through what I did before. Winding up a POW again is out of the question.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Does that mean what I think it does, JJ?”

“Major Russell, are you asking if I will put a bullet in my brain rather than let the NVA capture me a second time?” Jackson slammed his hand on the table. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Chief placed his Colt M1911A1 .45 caliber service pistol next to Jackson’s hand. “Colonel, I’ll be there right beside you if it comes to that.”

Jackson acknowledged each man with a nod. “Okay, guys, now that we’ve been morbid about what if the worst occurs, let’s talk about the best-case scenario. We get in and out, and no one is the wiser. We have to wait for the CIA to deliver the forgeries. I need to arrange the HALO to avoid any snafus. I don’t want the paperwork lost and leave us with no ride. It will take at least three days to get into the pipeline. Our backup plan for getting out if the chopper isn’t there or poops out on us is to hump out. We need to prepare for both contingencies in regard to ammo, food, and water.”

“And medical supplies,” Mikey, the unit medic, said emphatically, pointing at his CO. “You know how good ol’ Murphy likes to jump us and your little quirk of obtaining injuries when we least expect it, sir.”

“Of course, medical supplies. I don’t intend to need any this time around. If we get in without attracting attention, we should get out the same way. It should be a piece of cake for a suicide mission.”

Harry punched Jackson in the shoulder. “Right. When was the last time you had a simple mission in ‘Nam? One word, never. You always get the *point-one percent chance of pulling it off* complex operations. The problem is every time you complete one of them, someone gives you a harder one. Mikey’s right. You always wind up with pieces of metal embedded in your body.”

“Major, stop being a drama queen. I’m not that bad. Okay, guys, we’ve been together a long time. You know what to do, so let’s get it done. Major Russell and I are headed to flight ops to get the HALO in the books. We’ll meet same time and place tomorrow morning for our next briefing. If the dumbass who came up with this harebrained plan has anything new, I’ll let you know. Or maybe the brass will call it off. I don’t give good odds on that happening.” Jackson stood, and Harry followed.

The other men came to attention and saluted.

Jackson returned the salute. “At ease. Get to work.” He pivoted on his heel, and Harry fell into step beside him.