

The Jackson MacKenzie Chronicles

# PEACE AT A COST



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.

“Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to all of the weak, and esteem to all.” – George Washington

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

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

# CHAPTER 1

March 25, 1974  
Double M Ranch  
Beaver Creek, MT

“Get out of my way, Chief. That’s an order! I’m going to the barn to take care of my horse.” Jackson grabbed his coat and took a step toward the door.

“No, sir.” Chief blocked his path. “You have a 104-degree fever from the flu. You need to stay in bed.”

*I’m not sick. Why’s he being an asshole?* “Get out of my way,” Jackson growled like a rabid dog. Spit dripped off his chin. He chucked a glass from the dresser against the wall over Chief’s head. Glass shards rained down on him.

“No, sir.” Chief maintained his position in front of the door.

“Fuck all of you! I want to see my horse.” Jackson threw a punch that connected with Chief’s jaw, snapping his head back in a violent twist.

“Still not moving, boss.” Chief wiped blood from his split lip.

“Your choice.” Jackson launched his fist into Chief’s stomach.

Chief doubled over. His hand gripped his side. “Ouch. I think you broke my rib.”

“Don’t care.” Jackson shoved Chief out of the way.

“But I do, sir.” Chief grabbed Jackson with both arms and bent him backward into his bunk. “Mikey, get your ass over here and sedate him. I can’t hold him much longer.”

Jackson aimed his knee at Chief’s groin. It connected with a loud pop. The vise grip across his chest lessened, but not enough for him to escape. Someone pulled his arm straight and rolled up the sleeve. The smell of alcohol filled his nose. A cold cloth wiped his skin. “Don’t touch me, Roberts.”

Mikey shook his head. “I have to, sir. Your fever is climbing.”

“Leave me alone. That’s an order.” Jackson wiggled like a worm to get free. Seconds after the needle sting, the lights blurred. He glared at Mikey. “Traitor.” The feeling of floating came over him. A warm sensation coursed through his body. His ears rang, his muscles relaxed. Someone tugged off his boots, pants, and shirt. He fought against the darkness until a black hole swallowed him up.



*Thump-thump-thump. The sound of helicopter rotors filled the air. The evac choppers were on their way. On the ground, he heard gunfire nearby with mortars in the distance. Charlie must be close. They had to protect the LZ at all costs or wind up dead in a rotting jungle...or worse. It was the worse part that worried him. Jackson would die by his own hand before he’d let that happen again.*

*He lifted his M16 to his shoulder, crouched behind a large downed bamboo log, and braced the barrel on top. Ever so carefully, to avoid attracting attention, he pulled his Colt .45 pistol out of his holster and laid it next to the rifle muzzle. He did the same thing with his bayonet on the other side.*

*He wanted those items close in case they went hand to hand again. Charlie might send another human wave attack and overrun his position. The bodies in front of him were knee-high. Jackson wiped his forehead with the towel around his neck. It's hot out here.*

*Something heavy hit his back... ambush, or sapper... smashing him to the wet earth. With every ounce of strength, he fought back, kicking and twisting in the man's grasp. Being dragged by his arms, he dug his boot heels into the ground. He would not become a POW again. His back hit something hard. Large hands pinned him, and the lights went out.*

*Jackson opened his eyes and looked at the rafters. Dung must have him someplace new. He heard footsteps and faked sleep. Once darkness fell, he opened his eyes. Moonlight gave the room an eerie glow. He listened. Quiet. Not even a cricket. Rolling off the table, he crawled to the door and tried the knob. Locked. His hand hit something leaning against the wall. He felt along its length. Rifle? Next to it, a belt and holster. Pistol? He grabbed everything, belly crawled to the window, and slipped outside. In inky blackness, he leapfrogged from the prisoner barracks to fence posts and the motor pool.*

*Head down, heart-pounding, Jackson clutched his rifle and raced through the snow. No, it wasn't snow. Not in Vietnam.*

*Bullets whistled past him. Bombs exploded.*

*Were any of his men alive?*

*Ahead, he spotted a rundown bamboo hooch. He made it there in two long strides, flattened himself against the side, and peeked around.*

*A shadowy figure twenty-five yards away lifted a rifle.*

*Jackson aimed, fired twice, hit him, but the man didn't go down.*

*The soldier laughed and moved closer.*

*Jackson fired again. Emptied his rifle. Have to reload. Where's my ammo belt?*

*Charlie landed on him. Two or maybe three men. They wouldn't take him prisoner. Jackson kicked, pushed, and punched. There were too many of them. They pushed his face into the mud.*



Chief and Mangus scrambled for cover behind the wood rack as shots rang out near the main barn and hit the ground at their feet. The reports echoed in the still night air.

“Shit! He has the 30-30 rifle.” Mangus peeked over the logs.

“Yeah.” Chief stuck his head around the end. “I see him. He's next to the compost pile.” On hands and knees, he burrowed a tunnel through the snow and stuck his head up. Jackson had his back to him. The rifle pointed toward the house. Snow melted under his belly. *Five more yards.* He ducked down and wiggled until two bare feet appeared. Planting his boots in the ice, he launched himself at Jackson and flattened him to the ground.

“Hãy để tôi đi, fuckers mẹ. Cút đi. Xuông địa ngục.” Jackson kicked and fought.

“Boss, think. Use your brain. We're not the enemy. We're not in 'Nam anymore.”

Hands, arms, and feet flew as they wallowed a four-foot-deep hole in the snow.

“General, grab the weapons.” Chief poked his head up as he wrapped his arms around Jackson's torso. “He's hard to hold onto naked and wet. It's ten degrees. He'll get hypothermia quickly.”

Mangus jerked the weapons from Jackson's grasp.

Chief dragged Jackson through the snow to the main house. He bent, stopped, and leaned to avoid Jackson's arms and legs as he kicked or clawed. A few times Chief felt Jackson's strikes but kept going. Jackson's piercing screams caused his ears to ring. That pain wasn't half of what his friend was experiencing.



*Tied to a long wooden table by foot, hand, and a strap across his neck, Jackson watched Toad and Pig cut off his tattered uniform and Army issue boxer shorts.*

*Dung bent over him, his breath reeking of ginger, stinky fish sauce, and Pho. “You will admit to war crimes against my peaceful people. You tell the world how you bomb our cities and kill our children.”*

*“Go to hell. I will sign nothing. MacKenzie, Jackson J., Lieutenant Colonel, United States Army. Service number O748528. Birthday 7 December 1934.”*

*“You are criminal, not soldier. No Geneva convention here. I can kill you and no one care, Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie.”*

*Jackson smiled. “Not a soldier, huh? Why’d you call me, Lieutenant Colonel?” He launched the biggest snot encrusted spitwad he could into Dung’s face.*

*Dung jumped back, brushing the dribble from his chin. He cackled like a hyena. “Teach him a lesson.”*

*Toad’s fist smashed into Jackson’s face. His nose broke. Pain shot through him as blood flowed into his mouth. Blows landed on his abdomen. His balls felt like baseballs. His stomach was filled with shards of glass, each point slicing his insides. He wanted to curl into a ball and die. Toad snapped toothy pincers to his groin. Sparks lit the room as Toad touched the other end to a car battery. Lightning and heat shot up Jackson’s spine as he flopped on the table.*

*Toad pulled a large knife off the shelf and scraped the metal blade on a whetstone.*

*Oh shit.*

*Toad held a piece of paper in Jackson’s view then sliced through it.*

*The knife was razor sharp. What’s he going to do?*

*Toad lowered the knife to his side.*

*Jackson felt the blade against the right side of his testicles, the cut, then ungodly pain. Blood ran down his butt crack.*

*Toad held the knife in front of Jackson’s eyes. His blood dripped onto his face. The smell of iron filled the air. He tasted it in his mouth.*

*The ground shook as bombs fell from the B-52s high above.*

*Toad lowered the blade to Jackson’s throat.*

*Well, I guess this is goodbye. I won’t beg for my life.*

*The blade started its cut. At the last second, it slid to Jackson’s side, severed his bonds, and nicked his wrist. He could move his hands. Toad and Pig lifted him from the table, their hands slipping on his blood. They carried him outside and threw him into the pit with the other prisoners.*

*Eight feet down, Jackson smacked the water. Mud oozed into his closed eyes and open cuts. The fire in his body began again.*

*Another round of explosions rocked the compound. Bloody, beaten, and naked, Jackson pressed himself into a corner with the other prisoners. He couldn’t breathe the bodies were so tightly packed together. His ears rang as more bombs exploded. Pinpricks of shrapnel flew everywhere. He covered his head with his arms.*

*As the bombs moved north, the roar quieted. The men moved away from the corner.*

*Jackson slid down the wall and sat in the mud, his legs refusing to hold him. Something buzzed by his ears and landed on his chest. He slapped the mosquito. The last thing he needed was malaria.*

*Ty laid his uniform shirt over Jackson’s groin.*

*He’s trying to maintain my dignity. I think that’s gone now.*

*Harry slipped a muddy t-shirt over Jackson's head. "I don't need this."  
"Thanks, buddy." It took all Jackson's strength to get his arms through the holes.  
Bill held out his boxer shorts as he buttoned his pants.  
What would I do without these guys? Jackson pulled them over his still bleeding groin then exhaustion took over. He fell face-first in the mud.*



Mikey joined the scuffle as Chief pulled Jackson through the kitchen into the hall. Jackson wrapped his legs around the center stairway support, bringing them to a halt.

Mikey helped Mangus pry Jackson loose, his screams echoing in the house.

With one final yank, Chief threw Jackson onto the bed in the first-floor bedroom and lay on top of him. "Mikey, give him something. Not that piddly-ass stuff from earlier. It's like trying to hold onto a slimy octopus. Knock his butt out cold. I can't hang onto him any longer."

Mikey rummaged around his bag. "All I have left is diazepam. It's dangerous without a way to monitor the colonel's vital signs."

"Do it, Mikey." Mangus grabbed Jackson's arm. "But do it fast. He's half off the bed already. If he gets leverage, I won't be able to control him."

"Use enough to knock out a small horse. The normal amount won't stop him." Chief yanked his arm away from Jackson's teeth.

Mikey jabbed the needle into Jackson's butt.

Jackson looped his legs around Chief's neck, flipped him over the bed, and took off.

Chief pushed himself up and ran after him. He stopped at the front door. Jackson lay face-first on the floor, his hand gripping the knob. "Get his feet, Mikey. I'll get his shoulders."

With Jackson draped like a limp noodle between them, they carried him to the bedroom.

"Should we tie him down?" Mikey picked up his medical bag from the floor.

Chief laid a hand on Jackson's chest. "I can't. Not after what Dung did to him. Can you?"

"No, but I need to call Dr. Wells. This is above my head as a medic." Mikey picked up the phone and dialed the office number. "Doc, can you come out to the Double M?"

"Sure. Be there in an hour. Same as in town?" Dr. Wells asked.

Mikey looked at Jackson. "Yeah. I'll explain when you get here." He pulled his stethoscope and blood pressure cuff out of his bag then started his checklist. After writing everything on a pad of paper, he sat next to the bed.

"Mikey, are you okay?" asked an older male voice.

Mikey turned around. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just worried about the colonel. He's really sick. His Post Vietnam Syndrome anxiety and flashbacks popped up due to the high fever from the flu. I gave him a dose of diazepam. He's sleeping."

Dr. Wells removed his coat. "Why didn't you tie him down?"

"We can't. Dung did terrible things to him tied down."

"I guess you have some lingering trauma from Vietnam too, huh, kid?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not hampered by those memories." Dr. Wells set his medical bag on the dresser. He pulled out several items. A blood pressure cuff, stethoscope, syringes, a vial of strong narcotics, and four padded leather cuffs. "I came prepared, Mikey. This wrought-iron king-size bed is perfect for keeping him comfortable and still."

Jackson's godmother came in. "Can I help?"

“Yes.” Dr. Wells turned to Sara Malone. “We need to keep cold, wet washcloths on his forehead. Ice packs under his armpits, neck, and groin will help with the fever. It’ll cool the blood going into his head so he doesn’t develop brain damage if his temperature gets too high. Anything around 107 or so will stew his brain into mush. Wrap the ice packs in towels so he doesn’t get frostbite.”

“Consider it done.” Sara left the room.

Dr. Wells handed Mikey an IV bag and setup. “We need to start him on IV fluids before his organs shut down. I don’t want him going into convulsions from dehydration. He can’t eat or drink while I have him restrained. He could go into a coma or die.”

Mikey inserted the catheter into Jackson’s forearm. “You got that right, Doc. He’s already been close to organ failure once. I don’t think his body can take it again without permanent damage.”

Sara returned with a tray. It held a bowl of water, washcloths, folded towels, and a stack of ice-filled plastic bags.

Mikey placed the ice bags in Jackson’s armpits and under his neck.

Dr. Wells stuck one between Jackson’s legs and under his knees.

Mikey pulled a thick blanket from the closet and tucked it around Jackson.

Sara sat next to the bed. She held a book in one hand and stroked Jackson’s sweat-soaked hair with the other.

*The colonel’s in good hands.* Mikey leaned against the wall, listening to Sara’s sweet voice as she read to Jackson. It helped relieve his fears.

### March 28, 1974

Sara sat by Jackson’s bedside as he babbled incoherently and tossed from side to side. Sweat poured off him by the gallon. *God, he’s so pale.*

Mikey came up beside her. “Do you need a break, ma’am?”

“No. I need to stay with him. Manny’s promise to watch out for James’ son is my promise. Do what you need to do.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mikey hung a new bag of IV fluids and attached it to the line running into Jackson’s forearm. He pumped up a blood pressure cuff and placed his stethoscope on Jackson’s chest, then stuck a digital thermometer in his ear.

*This can’t be good.* “How’s he doing, Mikey?”

“Still really fevered. His temperature’s pushing 106.”

“That’s bad, isn’t it?” *I can’t lose him. He’s one of my kids.*

“Yes.”

Chief walked in. “Is the colonel still out?”

“Yeah. He’s shaky. It’s taking a lot out of him. His blood pressure and pulse are erratic. Dr. Wells said if his temperature doesn’t start going down by tomorrow, we need to take him to the hospital,” Mikey said.

“Not good.” Chief gripped Sara’s shoulder. “I can clean the house and do the laundry for you, Miss Sara, so you can stay with him.”

“That’s sweet of you.” Sara gave him a small smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Chief left. A few minutes later, the roar of the vacuum cleaner echoed in the hall.

Sara bent down to Jackson’s ear. “You have such good friends. They are my godsend. Don’t ever let them go.” She picked up a book and read the words aloud.



“He can’t hear you,” Dr. Wells said as he came in.

“I think he can. It helps me get through the day. How long do you think this will last?”

“Don’t know. He’s caught a bad strain. There have been several deaths in Billings.”

“Oh, no.”

“As strong as he is, Jackson will kick the flu out to the curb. It’ll just take a few days.

Sara kissed Jackson’s forehead. “Get well, honey. I’ll be here if you need anything.”



*Hot sheet metal burned his back. Sweat ran down his face. His knees were in his chest. Jackson looked through the small hole above his head at the sun high above. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed his body somewhere else. Willed for the ungodly hellhole to disappear.*

*Jackson forced his eyes open. “So much for my wish. Still here.” Salty sweat ran into his eyes. The burning sun, a few degrees farther west, still shown through the hole.*

*The side of the box vibrated. Toad was kicking it again.*

*“Đi đến địa ngục mẹ fucker!”*

*A small, light voice tickled his ears. “Chapter twelve. A Stormy Day.”*

*Jackson looked behind him to find the echo. No one but him resided in the small metal box. He was alone.*

**March 30, 1974**

He heard sounds. Wind outside a window. Pots clanging together. A whoosh that might be a vacuum. *Is this real?* Jackson opened his eyes slightly then slammed them shut at the glaring light. He waited until the spots disappeared then forced his eyes open. His godmother hovered over him with a steaming bowl of something that smelled good. He rubbed his eyes to remove the gritty-gummy crap holding them half-closed. *It is real.* “Mmmm. Chicken soup. Aunt Sara, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Sara handed him the tray.

*Did I really shoot at Uncle Manny and Chief? And call Mikey a traitor. Oh crap. I broke Chief’s rib.* “Being such an ass to everyone. I remember doing it but couldn’t stop myself. It was like I was in two places at once. ‘Nam and here. I didn’t know which one was real. If I was wrong, Dung would win.”

Sara rubbed the top of his head. “Don’t worry about it. Eat your soup.”

“Did you read *Black Beauty* to me?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “You did hear it?”

Jackson nodded. “Bits and pieces. Enough to know the story. Your voice made me feel safe. Can you bring me another bowl and more crackers? I’m hungry.”

“I made a big pot. When I can’t keep enough food on the table for you, then I’ll know you’re all better.” Sara’s apron twirled as she left the room.

Jackson leaned into his pillows and sipped his soup. He treated the people who believed in him like the enemy. His godparents and friends. *The Army screwed me up good. It’s still biting me in the ass.*

October 1, 1974  
Double M Ranch  
Beaver Creek, MT

Seven months after Jackson's horrible bout with the flu, Mikey and Chief were in the living room when he came in with a padded leather cuff in his hand. "I got this from Dr. Wells after my check-up yesterday. He told me about your problems with restraining me. Can I talk to you guys for a moment?"

Chief and Mikey ducked their heads.

"Look up, both of you. Please."

Mikey peeked up with big pupils and flickering eyelids.

"You too, Chief."

Chief raised his head but refused to look at him.

Jackson tossed the cuff aside and clutched their shoulders. "Guys, it's okay. Really. It was for everyone's safety. I was acting like a crazy fool. If Chief hadn't stopped me, I might've killed him or Uncle Manny. How could I live with myself if that happened? More than likely, once I regained my senses, I would've put the same gun in my mouth. I couldn't live with that. Not with all the faces that still haunt my dreams."

Chief met Jackson's eyes. "No way would you have shot us, sir. You were shooting into the dirt to warn us off."

"Sergeant, you know that's not true. I saw Toad and Dung, not you and Uncle Manny. If I had managed to get you fully in my sights, none of us would be here."

"Boss, I don't know."

*And I thought I was in denial.* Jackson shook Chief's shoulder. "Well, I do. We have extensive training on how to kill with our bare hands. If the gun failed, there was always the tried and true method. I made quite a reputation for myself breaking necks in 'Nam in less than a second. Don't worry about it."

Chief drew circles on the floor with his boot. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"I'm glad you understand, boss. It killed us to see you restrained to the bed. It hurt my soul having seen you trussed up to a pole like a pig on a spit."

"Well, it's over now. Forget about it. Let's go grab a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Mikey can have a glass of milk."

Mikey cocked his head. "Milk?"

"Yes, young one. Milk. You're acting like you're ten years old. Not a three-tour veteran of 'Nam."