

— CODE OF HONOR • 3 —

DARK AMBITIONS

IRENE HANNON



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To my husband, Tom—
as we celebrate our 30th anniversary.

Thank you for sticking with me
through happy times and sad,
for putting up with my episodes of writer's angst,
for your unwavering fidelity, love, and devotion . . .

And most of all, for being my hero—and friend.

I love you more than words can say.

PROLOGUE

“He got away.”

As the bad news echoed across the miles, I stared at the skeleton of the leaf-stripped tree beside me and tightened my grip on the burner phone.

“What do you mean, he got away? You told me this would be a piece of cake.” A cloud of breath formed in front of my face, the frigid December air pricking my cheeks.

Silence on the other end of the line.

My hired gun must be miffed by my accusatory tone.

Tough.

I’d paid a premium price for his specialized skills, and I expected results—not screwups.

“He fought back.” The man’s voice was measured, but an undercurrent of annoyance tightened his words.

The irritation went both ways.

“Of course he fought back.” I took a final drag on my cigarette, dug out one of the pieces of aluminum foil I always carried, and crushed the butt on the edge of the empty planter beside me. “He was in the army. I told you that.”

"You said he was a medic—and that he's been out for several years."

"He was . . . and he has been."

"Then he does some serious workouts. I was fortunate to walk away with nothing worse than a bruised jaw."

"You should have done more homework."

"You didn't give me time."

That was true.

And the fast turnaround had cost me extra.

"You'll heal." I began to pace. If the man wanted sympathy, he was out of luck. "I want this finished before he goes to the police."

"If he was going to involve law enforcement, he'd have done so already . . . and I'd know about it."

That was probably also true—assuming the guy had all the connections he'd claimed.

Another reason I'd paid top dollar for the job.

"Where is he now?"

"Unknown. He's fallen off the radar. But I'll find him."

My stomach twisted into a hard knot, and I halted. "You think he realized he was set up?"

"His disappearing act would suggest that."

"How fast can you track him down?"

"Depends on whether his evasive abilities are as well-honed as his fighting skills."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Our agreement called for this to be finished by the end of the week. Do I have to bring in someone else?"

"No. The job will get done—but from now on, I'm doing it my way."

I frowned. "What does that mean?"

"There are more creative methods of offing people than tossing them from a balcony or staging a robbery."

“It has to look like the death was an unfortunate consequence, not the goal.”

“Understood.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Do you want details—or results?”

This guy had attitude with a capital A.

But as long as he earned his money, who cared?

“Fine. Let me know when it’s over and I’ll settle up.”

“Count on it.”

The line went dead.

I stabbed the end button and shoved the phone back into my pocket, quashing the tiny twinge of guilt nipping at my conscience.

Misplaced guilt.

After all, what choice did I have? Given what he knew, letting him live was too much of a risk.

Especially with the dream in sight.

The icy wind picked up, numbing my fingers.

I ought to get back inside. I had places to go, people to meet, things to do.

But I also needed another cigarette.

Bad.

I dug deep into the pocket of my coat and pulled out the pack of unfiltered Camels, along with the Bic. Shook out a coffin nail. Flipped the lighter against the tip. Inhaled slow and deep.

Yes, it was a nasty habit—but there was nothing like a nicotine rush.

And some days, a few stolen moments like these were the only downtime I got.

My regular cell began to vibrate, and I groped for it as I took another drag on the Camel.

Sighed as I glanced at the screen.

This break was going to be short-lived.

I put the cell to my ear. “Yes?”

“Did I catch you in the middle of something?”

“No.” I stubbed out the cigarette on the piece of aluminum foil and folded up the whole mess. One of these days soon I’d have to quit for good. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to confirm the details for this afternoon’s meeting.”

“Okay.”

I half listened as I headed inside. I already knew the details . . . and the personalities . . . and the stakes. But this underling was just doing her job. Dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s. I couldn’t hold her diligence against her—even if I had bigger issues on my mind.

Like an unfinished job.

But once this loose end was tied up, my goal would be within touching distance.

All I had to do was stay the course, follow the plan—and keep my eye on the prize.

1

There was blood on the ice.

Rick Jordan jolted to a stop, gaze riveted on the crimson spots blemishing the frosty ground, fingers tightening on the disposable cup of coffee he'd just nuked.

Could his eyes be playing tricks on him in the waning light of the December afternoon?

He leaned closer.

No.

His 20/20 vision hadn't failed him.

It was blood.

After all the gore he'd seen, it wasn't difficult to make a positive ID.

But with all the wildlife on the wooded acreage he called home, could it be from an animal?

As he peered at the ruby-colored stains, the hair on the back of his neck snapped to attention—and since metabolic cues had saved his hide on more Night Stalker missions than he cared to remember, ignoring them would be foolish.

The blood was human.

Giving the landscape a thorough, methodical sweep, he set

down the cup of java he'd picked up at the café during his supply run to town, balancing it on the uneven ground.

No movement other than the huge flakes that had begun to sift down from the leaden sky.

Apparently the blizzard warning issued this morning had been spot-on. Missouri would have a white Christmas.

Nothing wrong with a Currier and Ives-style holiday—except the flakes were rapidly covering the trail of splotches on the three-day-old ice crystals from Tuesday's sleet storm.

In minutes, they'd be impossible to track.

Continuing to scan his surroundings, he removed the compact Beretta from the concealed holster clipped to his belt. No reason to carry when the camp was full of kids and counselors, but wandering around unarmed in winter on 650 isolated, deserted acres?

Not happening.

He might never have needed a gun in the four years he'd called this rural Missouri acreage home, but it was better to risk overkill than be killed.

And while the camp had always been a peaceful refuge for him and the hundreds of kids who visited each season, his goosed adrenaline suggested that was about to change.

Pistol in hand, he followed the uneven trail of blood, only the muffled quack of a duck from the lake a hundred yards away breaking the stillness. No more than a few scarlet spots here and there dotted the frozen surface, but they were sufficient to keep him on course.

The trail ended at the canoe shed, which was closed up tight for the winter season.

Or it had been, before someone picked the padlock.

Shifting into military stealth mode, Rick edged next to the structure and put his ear to the door.

Silence.

Firming his grip on the Beretta, he yanked the wide door open and flattened his back against the wall, out of sight.

More silence.

If anyone was inside, they'd masked their surprise well.

Either that, or they weren't able to respond.

After thirty soundless seconds ticked by, Rick risked a peek around the edge of the door frame.

Nothing was amiss.

The racks of canoes looked the same as they had when he'd stacked them for the winter. The paddles were in their brackets, life vests stashed in their bins, fishing rods lined up against the wall like soldiers in formation.

And there was no blood inside, as far as he could tell after flipping on the light and making a quick circuit.

Nor was there anything to suggest someone had taken refuge in the structure.

A frigid gust of air swooped in through the open door, bringing with it an assault of snowflakes—but the arctic weather alone wasn't responsible for the shiver that snaked through him.

Where had the injured person gone?

Rick stepped outside again, ducked his head against the polar onslaught, and peered at the ground as he walked the area in a tight grid pattern.

There were no more red blots.

Even the original trail he'd followed had disappeared under a blanket of fresh powder.

Nothing remained to indicate anyone had ventured onto his property.

In fact, if he'd detoured to his computer after arriving home from town instead of indulging in a stroll to the dock while he finished his coffee, he would never have seen the blood. Nor would he have visited the canoe shed until he began prepping for the Saturday spring camps, a task that was weeks away.

Strange timing.

Providential, almost.

Yet what did it matter?

Whoever had broken into the outbuilding had done no harm or stolen anything. There was minimal blood, and the person had seemingly left of their own volition.

The incident might be a bit bizarre, but it wasn't a life or death situation, like the ones he'd faced in the Middle East.

Tugging up the collar of his coat, Rick returned to the shed and flipped off the light. Lock repairs would have to wait until the storm subsided—but the delay posed little risk. There wasn't much chance anyone would venture out in this weather to steal his lake equipment.

Best plan?

Go back inside and hunker down until the storm blew over. There was no reason to linger while the biting wind burrowed into every seam of his outerwear and the sky hurled icy BBs at his cheeks.

He turned away.

Took three steps.

Hesitated.

You're missing something, Jordan.

Hard as he tried to muffle the tiny voice in his head, it refused to be silenced.

Especially since he couldn't shake the feeling that his mysterious visitor had been more than a vagrant or a vandal who'd gotten cut on barbed wire or tripped on a rock and ended up with a bloody nose.

Heaving a sigh, he pivoted, tramped back to the shed, and opened the door again. Unless he did another walk-through, his keep-at-it-until-you-solve-the-puzzle gene wasn't going to shut up.

Back inside, he flicked the light switch and began a second loop, this one much slower.

Halfway through, he hit pay dirt.

The two small objects on the stern seat of one of the canoes, half tucked into the shadows, hadn't been there when he'd closed up the place for the winter.

Palming the items, he angled his hand toward the light.

Sucked in a breath.

The identity of his visitor was no longer a mystery.

Boomer had been here.

But . . . why had he shown up, unannounced, after all these years?

What had caused the blood?

Why had the man left?

Where had he gone?

Was he coming back?

Only one person could supply those answers—and he'd vanished.

Another blast of bitter air pummeled him, and Rick slid the two items into the pocket of his coat. After wrestling the door back into place, he slogged toward the cabin, head bent against the wind.

Halfway back, as he slowed to scoop up the cup of java balanced on the frozen ground, a vulture circled overhead, riding the wind currents in search of death.

Bad omen—if you were the superstitious type.

He wasn't.

Ignoring the macabre scavenger, he focused instead on the Christmas riddle that had arrived on his doorstep.

His visitor hadn't been some random stranger, but a person he'd once worked with every day.

A person who, under normal circumstances, would have contacted him to arrange a visit rather than show up out of the blue.

Meaning things were far from normal—and the man must need his help.

If I can ever do anything for you, all you have to do is pick up the phone or email me or knock on my door.

As the wind shrieked and ice pellets continued to sting his cheeks, the promise he'd made almost six years ago echoed through Rick's mind.

He'd meant every word of it then.

He still did.

It was the least he could do for the fellow soldier who'd saved his life . . . and almost lost his own in the process.

But to help a man, you first had to find him.

And with night falling, a blizzard approaching, and Christmas Eve mere hours away, that might be as difficult as a snatch 'n' grab mission in a Little Bird deep behind enemy lines.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

"Come on . . . pick up . . . pick up."

As Jackson Dunn muttered the plea into the pay phone, he squinted at the parking lot of the truck stop through the frost-caked window. No suspicious activity that he could see.

But if there was no answer on this third try, he couldn't linger any longer. He'd have to hitch a ride back into St. Louis with one of the truckers, wait out the storm—and pray he'd eluded whoever had been tasked with silencing him.

"I'm sorry we can't take your call at the moment. Messages are retrieved every day during the off-season, so please leave your name and . . ."

Muttering an oath, Jackson slammed the handset back into the hook. Wiped an unsteady hand down his face. Filled his lungs with air.

He had to calm down. Think. Tearing out of Lexington with only a hastily packed overnight bag, his medical kit, a wallet containing less than two hundred dollars, and no clear plan

hadn't been his smartest decision—but panic could muddle a man's thinking.

And driving around aimlessly for three days, holing up in out-of-the-way spots while he tried to figure out what to do, hadn't cleared his mind much.

Then he'd remembered Rick's promise—and his destination had become obvious.

The army captain was smart, honest, ethical, and trustworthy. He was also a clear thinker who would give sound advice.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been home.

Winching, Jackson shifted to take more weight off his injured leg.

It was possible Rick had been out running errands ahead of the blizzard, though. He hadn't had any plans to travel for the holiday, according to his Christmas card. Waiting around in the shed for him to return had seemed like a reasonable option.

Until hypothermia had become an imminent concern—and those gunshots in the distance had gotten a little too close.

Maybe the volleys had been from hunters.

Maybe not.

Sticking around to find out, however, hadn't seemed like the best plan.

Jackson gave the greasy spoon another survey. As far as he could tell, no one had followed him here. He was safe . . . for now.

But hoofing it two miles to the camp and back from the small town where the cab had dropped him and later picked him up—a necessary precaution in case anyone was watching his rental car in St. Louis—had done a number on the superficial stab wound in his calf. Too bad he hadn't stocked the medical kit in his trunk with sutures.

He could also use a dose of Percocet.

Propping one shoulder against the wall for support, he looked down. The dark stain was barely visible on the denim of his black jeans, but he could feel the wetness.

The wound was bleeding again.

He'd have to duck into the bathroom, fix it as best he could with the remaining supplies he'd brought, and see if he could persuade one of the truckers to give him a lift back to the city. After he retrieved the rental car he'd picked up at the Lexington airport, he'd find a low-key place to stay and try calling the camp again.

If no one answered?

He'd have to consider leaving a message.

Not his first choice.

With the mess he was in, it would be safer for Rick if there were no voicemails linking the two of them. Putting the man at risk wasn't part of his game plan. A quick, under-the-radar visit to get his take on the situation and ask his advice—that's all he wanted.

In the meantime, he had to keep moving. His Visa purchases had left a trail, if anyone accessed his credit card records. Staying in one place too long would be dangerous.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he limped toward the men's room and gave the diner another once-over.

None of the patrons were paying any attention to him.

Yet someone, somewhere, could be tracking his movements.

And it was possible they'd find him before he connected with Rick.

If that happened, he wasn't likely to escape again. They'd be ready for resistance on the next go-round.

Fear roiling his gut, he curled his fingers into tight balls and kept walking toward the men's room despite the sudden shakiness in his legs.

At least he'd left the most important items at the camp—and

once Rick discovered the open lock on the shed, he'd investigate . . . and find them.

It would require effort to connect the dots, but the army captain would do it. He was as sharp as they came.

He was also a man of honor who would keep the promise he'd made to help if ever a need arose.

Hopefully, though, he wouldn't have to solve the puzzle alone. If Rick picked up the next call, they could arrange an in-person meeting and get all the facts on the table. And he might, if he'd looked at his voicemail and realized someone was trying hard to reach him.

Jackson pushed through the door to the empty restroom and claimed a sink in the far corner. As soon as he applied a fresh bandage, he'd head back to St. Louis, call the camp again, and pray his good fortune held while he waited out the storm.

After all, escaping his attacker with only a minor wound had been nothing short of a miracle.

But as he turned on the tap and hot water gushed out, burning his fingers, he had a sinking feeling his luck was running out.