

THE CHURCHYARD

Sample Chapter

CHAPTER ONE

Zack Hartack's edgy sleep rocked him and his bed where he lay in the church's basement. Was it the lightning flashes or the thunder clashes that filtered through the single window in the small room? Or was it another nightmare that followed him from battle-torn Afghanistan. He stirred, rolled from his stomach to his back, and gazed at the light show. Just like the battlefield, bombs blasting, weapons firing, men screaming. Would it ever end? He shot his hands to the top of his head and curled into a fetal position. Sweat poured off his forehead, and the trembling began.

Several minutes passed before he calmed down and eased around. Only a moment of relief brought him back before he heard the loud crash. He shook his head, grabbed the flashlight on his nightstand, reached for his crutches, and hobbled out of bed on his remaining right leg.

Throughout the day, the skies had been threatening, and as night came on, thunder and lightning pounded the dark sky above the small town of Craggy Cove. Thank God the light show and rain had let up some. The lone woman glanced out her car window. The wind and mist were bad enough.

The dark day blended seamlessly into one of those dreary stay-at-home fall nights everyone tried to avoid, but this night she had a Halloween party she'd promised to go to. Now the woman was on her way home with only a couple of drinks in her, proud of her self-control.

The relentless wind whipped and slashed through the trees on the side of the lonely road that wound around the outskirts of town, her Honda Civic the only car on the road in the storm. In a hurry, she drove faster than she should have and was a little anxious. Friends told her more than once she worried too much. Which worried her.

As she approached the bend in the road just before the creepy old church, a group of young, drunken hooligans wearing masks, who had obviously been partying at a nearby house, stumbled into the street. Startled, she slammed on the brakes, but the car skidded off the embankment and overturned in front of the churchyard.

The sound of shrieking brakes, followed by a deafening crash split the Halloween night air. The young kids in their scary masks stopped, stared at the overturned car, then looked at each other. One laughed, soon followed by the others.

They turned to their car, no longer stumbling, as they roared away into the night.

From the entryway of Saint Anthony's Catholic Church, Zack Hartack swayed on his crutches in the fierce wind as he stared at the disaster about thirty-five feet in front of him. In a few seconds his mind registered there was a wrecked car upside down by the side of the road. The taillights stuck up in the air and smoke drifted from under the hood as Zack hurried to the wreck.

The overturned car's wheels still spun; the driver's door was caved in and the window smashed to pieces. He heard moans coming from the front seat; it sounded like

a woman. He smelled gas, a bad sign, and hoped it wasn't leaking fast. The driver was a young female. She hung suspended by her seat belt, head slack, red hair spilling down the ceiling of the car. The air bag had deployed against her chest and she was splattered with blood. Zack tried to pull the door open, but it didn't budge. He reached in and took her warm wrist in his hand, felt for a pulse and found it, a very weak one. He heard her labored breathing, and thought again of the gas fumes that had invaded the car; time was short. She groaned, and opened her eyes.

Then as they came into focus, she looked wildly at Zack.

"Hold on, Lady, help is on the way," though he didn't know how. He had no cell phone and wished he still had two legs now.

"Dude, holy shit!"

A local kid Zack recognized came into view as Zack knelt by the open window of the car, holding the driver's hand. Some other kids were taking videos of the wreck with their phones. The one standing in front of Zack had long, dark hair and one white eye, one of those ghostly contacts they liked to wear. Zack wondered if he was really awake. He got a whiff of the kid's beer breath and knew that he was.

"We already called 9-1-1," the kid with the white eye said. "She gonna make it?"

A cry cut the night air from within the vehicle, then silence.

Zack peered into the driver's window, saw she was unconscious. "Please, God, keep her alive." He made the sign of the cross. Then he heard the sound of sirens approaching.

The flashing lights of a fire truck followed closely by an ambulance glistened off the wet pavement as they slammed to a halt. The crews leapt out like synchronized swimmers, their large flashlights blazing as they rushed to the smoking vehicle. Two of the firemen quickly sprayed the car with fire retardant foam, and the smoke ceased rising from beneath the hood.

Zack pointed to the woman hanging by her seat belt. "She's trapped in the front seat."

One of the paramedics reached through the broken window and felt for a pulse.

"Not much of a beat." He motioned to a fireman. "Weak pulse, got to get her out, fast"

"Will do," said the shorter and stockier of the two firefighters, the owner of impossibly massive shoulders. In his hands he held "the Jaws of Life".

Furiously he began to peel off the crushed driver's door. This was a bit

tricky, for the paramedics were in the way as they supported the limp woman, still suspended upside down by the seat belt. When the door came off, the paramedics quickly leaned in and held her steady as they severed the seat belt.

Once a strap was around her forehead and a collar around her neck, she was completely stabilized; only then did they dare move her.

Gently, ever so gently, they lifted her from the car and onto the backboard, hoping to spare her any further injury. A fireman leaned over and picked up her purse from the side of the road.

The rain started up again and pelted them, two firemen held a tarp over her as the paramedics checked her vitals and intubated her to help her breathing.

They checked her arms and legs for broken bones and found none. Then they hooked her up to a monitor and IV before they called the hospital.

“This is Unit 51. We have a female in her twenties with possible internal injuries from a car wreck. No sign of broken bones so far. Will stabilize her before transport. Out.” They loaded her onto their gurney and the fireman who held the purse gently placed it next to her. Time to move out.