

## Chapter One

He wanted it all to be over; the war in Iraq, the terrorism, the death, the killing, but it wasn't going to stop. Explosions rocked a large market in Iraq, disrupting a diplomatic visit by two ranking House leaders. The in-country reporter looked nervously over his shoulder at the chaos behind him as he searched for something to say. The scene played out on the plasma television above the bar, caught on tape by CNN cameras. The details on the forty-something U.S. soldiers killed that day scrolled along the bottom. The image changed to show visiting Representatives Jackson and Levey being rushed to a Bradley armored vehicle by a tight knot of amour-clad soldiers.

Pete Robinson teetered on the bar stool contemplating the grizzly scene. The more he thought about the war, the more he drank and the more he drank, the angrier he got. He'd been here for the last two hours. He was shit-faced and pissed-off. *Just nuke the fuckers*, he thought.

The scene above changed again. This time to images of innocent Iraqi citizens caught in the middle. Women wailed over the bloody bodies of their children caught in the blast. *Children should be playing hide and seek, not cowering in the corners of their hovels shaking in fear for their lives.*

Pete lowered his gaze to stare through the bottom of his empty glass as if he expected answers to magically appear there. An empty bottle of Jack Daniels stood guard like a lone sentry--taunting him--begging for attention. It had only been two months, yet the feeling was becoming all too familiar. The soldiers fighting the battles were little more than children themselves. The lucky parents were left behind; hoping and praying. The unlucky parents mourned their loss. Worse still were those like Pete Robinson.

The electric buzz of the casino, with its rowdy shouts from the craps tables and the monotonous melodies of the slot machines seemed to bend around his ears; unheard. Cigarette smoke permeated his clothing and hair and choked his airways and lungs without notice. Spying the bartender from the corner of a bloodshot eye, Pete made a half-hearted wave. "Bring me another." His lips barely stumbled over the words.

"I'm sorry sir, but I think you've had enough." The bartender, looking ridiculous in his wavy blond hair and tight gold-sparkle blouse, laid a slip of paper on the counter. "That'll be forty-five dollars. Would you like to keep that on your Visa card?"

"Who the hell do you think you are? My mother?"

Sparkle-boy backed up a step.

“Maybe I *have* had enough, but it’s not your damn call to make.” His steely gaze sent the bartender another half-step back. “Yeah, leave it on the damn Visa.” His stare lowered to the glass once again.

Pete placed his face in callused palms, feeling the long stubble high on his cheeks and wondered how he must look to the outside world. “Fuck it...” He just didn’t give a shit anymore.

Sparkle-boy appeared again, tentatively sliding Pete’s credit card and receipt in front of him. “Please sign the top copy. I’m sorry sir... I mean about cutting you off. I have to follow the rules. I can’t--”

“Just shut the fuck up.” Pete scratched his signature on the blank line.

The bartender’s mouth clapped shut as he scurried off, a line slashed through the space for gratuities. Pete mumbled, “There you go asshole. Don’t spend it all in one place.” Standing on slightly wobbly legs with a hand on the back of the barstool for balance, he glanced around, finally noticing the hustle and bustle of the Silver Star Casino, Atlantic City’s newest resort. Adorned in silver walls and massive gold pillars, the main casino was an immense study of ostentatious gaudiness and glitz. Four stories overhead, the ceiling twinkled like the night sky in Montana. The center of the sky was dominated by a holographic projection of a huge star that seemed to hang magically, suspended in mid-air, pulsing eerie green and amber hues from the center. Surrounding the holograph, thick crystalline rods and stars suspended by fiber optic cables twinkled with vibrant hues. The ten-million dollar special effect was wasted on him.

It was too early to go home and he didn’t feel like finding another watering hole. He wandered through the maze of video poker and slot machines with their chintzy, simulated sounds of days gone by when real coins tumbled into dented, tin pots. Having to squeeze between rows of fat-assed, blue-hairs slapping buttons and pulling handles did little to settle his nerves. *Another fucking dead end.* He turned and staggered past the long row of gaming tables, where scantily clad waitresses ducked around him to force-feed cheap drinks to would-be winners. *Another dead end.*

“What the...” He looked up to find himself standing in front of the crowded poker room. People milled around the chrome railing separating the poker room from the main casino floor--many wearing military uniforms--jockeying for a view. Above the poker room hung a large banner. *Welcome Men and Women of the United States Armed Forces.* A sudden screech from the public address system pierced his alcohol-soaked brain like a sizzling knife.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the newest gem in Atlantic City, the Silver Star Hotel and Casino would like to welcome all of you to the first U.S. Armed Forces million-dollar

Texas Hold'em Championship. It's Silver Star's way of thanking the men and women of the armed forces for the sacrifices they make to ensure our freedom."

"Horseshit," Pete said. "Only if you come back in one piece."

A commotion rose in the far corner of the poker parlor. A small knot of marines and sailors were embroiled in a shoving match. Much like law enforcement, the various branches of the military seemed unable of working and playing together. With this group, the testosterone level was off the charts. As casino security and military police moved in, Pete decided to push his way through the crowd. No sense in being involved in an all out brawl if things escalated.

Being a full head taller than most, with broad shoulders and a full chest, Pete Robinson pretty much intimidated everybody. Unkempt gray hair and a scraggly beard contrasted with his neatly pressed oxford shirt and dress pants. Twenty-five years in the Secret Service had forged some habits that would never die. Those shoved from his path covered rather than retaliated. The snootful of whiskey only enhanced his sour mood.

Finally clear of the sea of uniforms, Pete looked for an exit sign. *These damned casinos never post clocks or exit signs. They'd be happy if you never found your way out. At least not until you lost every dollar you own. Then they'd toss your ass on the street while saying, "Thank you, come again."*

He spied a golden, luminescent sign for the hotel lobby, aimed his large frame in the direction of the arrow and lurched forward. Clearing the Keno Lounge, he spotted the oversize revolving door and dodged a petite uniformed lady conducting some sort of survey.

"Excuse me sir." A lyrical voice floated up from behind.

"Danni?" Pete turned to see the young brunette holding out a survey form. The girl looked a bit like Danni, shoulder length dark hair, large bright eyes and a pretty smile that stretched wide between her ears, displaying a mouth full of perfect, bleached teeth. She wore a neat business suit with a scarf around her neck emblazoned with the Silver Star Casino logo.

"Uh, no, my name is Lisa and I'd really appreciate it, if you could answer some questions for this survey. It will only take a minute and I can give you a coupon for twenty-dollars off the magic show in the Silver Star Theater..."

Pete grunted and turned back to the lobby, slamming into tall, rail-thin man wearing a dark fleece pullover with the hood tightened around his face. The man's covered head smashed into Pete's nose causing a burst of pain and a blinding white flash. The thin man's backpack fell to the marble floor with a dull thud as he flailed his arms to regain his balance.

Pete staggered back a step reaching for his throbbing nose and mumbled, "What the fuck?"

The man turned his head slightly toward Pete; his features shadowed by the hood, were oddly dark.

"Bloody wanker!" he said as he grabbed the pack from the floor and rushed toward the casino.

"Sir, are you all right?" Lisa the survey girl asked. "The nerve of some people!" She cocked her head to one side and accentuated her cuteness by jabbing her fists into the recesses of her tiny waistline. "Oh my God, your nose is bleeding. Let me take you to first aid."

That voice, it sounded so much like Danni, he thought. Light and airy with an innocence that... His eyes began to burn. He needed to get away. Now. As he spun away from her, shouts emerged from the casino behind him, then a low rumble followed by a deafening roar.

A blast of hot air smashed into Pete's back, hurling him forward, head first into the curved entryway. Safety glass buckled, sending shards into his scalp and forehead before his knees buckled and collapsed under his two-hundred-forty pounds. He fell backward and his head bounced off the marble floor--a dull thud echoing through his brain. The lights in the ceiling spread into visible, individual beams as his eyes lost focus. Everything began to fade as the screams and cries for help drifted away.

Pete fought for consciousness, shaking cobwebs from his clouded head and spraying blood that coated his short, graying hair to the floor around him. His senses were overloaded; pain radiated behind his eyes, his ears rang from the concussion of the shockwave and the distant whimpers of distress, his nose stung with the pungent scent of burnt flesh, and his eyes burned from the cloud of dust billowing from the casino floor. After two failed attempts to roll to his knees, he made a final lunge, body screaming in pain. Teetering on his knees, he fell forward and slapped his palms against the floor to catch himself, plunging them into shattered glass that coated the marble entryway like road salt. His lips peeled back exposing yellowing teeth as pain shot through his arms. Grimacing, he struggled to his feet while blood dripped down the wrinkles in his forehead. He brushed his hands together to scrape the embedded glass out of his hands and fingers. Razor-sharp bits snagged his skin, ripping more flesh.

Just in front of him, Lisa the survey girl lay face down in a spreading pool of shimmering blood; a crystal rod from the ceiling in the main casino protruded from her back as if she had been impaled by an icicle. "Oh, my God." He crossed himself and grabbed the scarf from around her neck. After wiping the blood from his eyes, he tied it around his forehead, Rambo-like, to intercept the blood oozing from his scalp. He moved toward the mayhem in the casino where throngs of people stampeded for the

exits. Pete watched as the panicked survivors tripped and stumbled over dead bodies before making his way against the crowd toward the poker room.

A loud snap from above caused him to instinctively throw his arms up and jump to his right. A large crystal rod crashed and shattered against the floor five feet from where he crouched. Glass fragments showered him as he huddled over, shielding his face.

“Holy shit! What is it with all the glass?”

Reaching the broken railing separating the poker room from the casino floor, Pete paused. The emergency lighting revealed uniformed bodies piled in heaps. Through the smoky haze, moans wafted upward signifying life somewhere beneath the carnage. Picking his way through the wreckage with an agility that belied his bulk, he began flipping bodies over. “Help me find you,” he called out. “Say something as loud as you can.”

“Help.” The faint voice emanated from somewhere on his left.

“Can you move?” Pete asked, stepping over debris and bodies.

“No. I’m pinned down. It’s dark.”

Pete craned his head trying to gauge where the voice came from. “Keep talking man. I think I’m close.” An eerie calmness settled over the casino as the last of the survivors made it through the exits, while sirens wailed far off in the distance. From above came a snapping sizzle of electricity and lightening-like flashes of bright, white light.

Pivoting his gaze upward, he noticed a large gaping hole in the false ceiling, exposing bundles of wires and catwalks used for surveillance. The catwalk directly above him hung at a precarious angle with severed electrical cables dangling and shorting out against the steel grating. The smell of a lightening storm stung his nostrils and the groan of fatigued metal suggested time was running short.

“What’s taking you so long?” The voice rose from the pile of debris and bodies directly in front of him.

“Okay, I think I know where you are. What’s your name?” Pete asked the rubble in front of him.

“Washington, Corporal Washington.”

“Well, Corporal, I’m going to try to get you out of there.” He glanced nervously upward at the swaying catwalk. *No time to be gentle*, he thought grabbing the severed torso of a woman’s body and tossing it aside like a Halloween prop. Several minutes later, he managed to expose the poker table and Corporal Washington’s legs. A large, black metal box pinned down the far corner of the table. About the size of a refrigerator

and just as heavy, the box was labeled in fancy script, 'Lighting Illusions Holograph Projector.' *Lucky for the poor bastard that it landed where it did. Three feet to the right and Corporal Washington would have been a statistic, if he wasn't one already.*

"Corporal, you still with me?"

"Yeah man." The voice was strained with the edges of pain becoming more apparent.

"If I lift the corner of the table, can you push your way out?"

"I'll try."

"Okay, on three; one, two, threeeee..." He summoned his considerable strength and lifted the corner. The table raised, maybe six inches. "Ugggggh. How you doin' down there?" His body shook with the strain as the dark room began to spin. He prayed he wouldn't pass out.

"No dice, man. I think my arms are broken."

Pete struggled to let the table back down gently.

"Oh my God, oh shit that hurts! Get it off!"

"Sorry Corporal, I need a new plan."

Two loud pops from above drew his attention upward. The catwalk dropped suddenly and Pete instinctively threw his arms up to ward it off. A loud screech sung out as the last two supports caught and held the weight, swinging the decking in a tight arc. He looked around for something to use as a lever. Blood tinged sweat dripped from the scarf; burning his eyes and blurring his vision.

He ran back to the entrance and pulled a long chrome pipe that had been part of the railing separating the poker room from the casino floor. Not sure it would be stout enough, he was out of options and slid it under the table near the moaning corporal. He grabbed a stool that had been blown to the ground and lifted the end of the pipe. The table raised, six inches, then ten. Pete used his foot to wedge the stool under the pipe as another loud metallic pop resounded from the ceiling above.

Not hesitating, he grabbed the legs of the corporal and yanked hard. An inhuman scream radiated from under the heavy felt-covered table masking the sounds of popping bones. As the corporal's head cleared the edge of the table, a series of loud whip-like cracks reverberated overhead. Pete threw his body over Corporal Washington as the catwalk broke through the ceiling and crashed to the floor, smashing and burying the holograph projector and the rest of the poker table.

Realizing the catwalk had missed them by a matter of inches and taking inventory of his body parts, he struggled to his feet, wrestled the unconscious corporal over his shoulder and headed for the exit. Large chunks of crystal snapped free of their fiber optic cables and shattered on the floor around him. Pete panted heavily as he picked his way through rubble and bodies with the full weight of the corporal on his broad shoulders. "Hang in there, buddy, we're almost out of here."

Relief washed over him when he made it through the doors and into the cool night air blowing off the ocean. The street was awash in flashing red, white and blue lights of emergency vehicles massing near the casino entrance. Paramedics rushed toward him and took Corporal Washington from his shoulder.

"Sir, come with me. Let me check you out," a young EMT shouted at Pete, grabbing his arm.

"I'm okay."

"Sir, you're pretty banged up. I need to check that head wound."

He allowed himself to be led by the youngster. The realization of the horrific event began to sink in as he looked around. Hordes of onlookers were being corralled by the police--everybody straining to see the death and destruction inflicted on innocent people. Wounded were being evaluated by a makeshift triage unit set up near the entrance as ambulances from all over Atlantic City were shuttling the most critical to area hospitals. Trails of blood reflecting the flashing lights gave the scene a horror movie quality.

Standing ten yards behind the ambulance treating Pete Robinson, on the other side of the police barriers, two men dressed in dark fleece pullovers and jeans watched the chaos. Their hoods pulled over their heads at an angle that shadowed their faces and hid sinister smiles. One was tall and thin, the other a bit shorter and bulky. After watching for ten minutes, they turned and walked down Boardwalk toward two identical white Honda Accords and without a word, each drove off in different directions.