

Club Saigon

By

Martin Robert Grossman



Club Saigon: Prologue

No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Richard M. Nixon

This story started more than fifty long years ago, not on the streets of L.A. but in a small Southeast Asian country called Vietnam. The Vietnam War, as it was known, took a terrible toll on many countries, many families and many individuals that were drawn into the geopolitical struggle.

Life is not a straight shot. It is not predictable. Two events only are guaranteed... a slap on the ass when we first arrive and a shovel-full of dirt in our face when we exit. Everything else we get is a result of the choices others make for us when we are young or those we make for ourselves... Life is as simple as that!

The 60's marked the beginning of the end for more than a way of life for the good old US of A; it also marked the end of the trail for more than 58,000 of America's finest. For those brave Americans that made it home, there were no parades, but for those that came home in body bags or those who never came home at all, at least, many years later they got a marble shrine with their names engraved on it... a metaphor for a parade.

WWII was mostly run by the Generals and Admirals who reported directly to the President. Generals like Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, McArthur, Lemay, and Admiral Nimitz, just to name a few. They didn't ask the President for permission to engage and kill the enemy...they just did it and that's why the Allies won the Second World War. They kicked ass and took names...Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo... they were all kicked to the curb without a second thought.

Power tends to corrupt. But the power in Washington resides in Congress if it wants to use it. It can do anything - it can stop the Vietnam War, it can make its will felt if it can ever get its act together to do anything.

Antonin Scalia

Vietnam was another story. By the 60's the politicians had their fingers into every aspect of American society and in order for them to continue their march toward absolute power they needed to micro-manage the Vietnam War. In the ten years from 1965-1975, that Americans were on the ground in Vietnam they never lost a battle. The boys on the ground had guts and resolve and they took it to the enemy wherever they found him. It was the folks at home, driven by politics and bleeding hearts that lost the Vietnam War for America... and many brave citizen soldiers went to their graves believing that was the case. In 1975 America cut and ran, struck the American colors for the first time in this nation's history and flew off from the roof of our embassy with our tail between our legs for the whole world to witness. The politicians using politico-speak called this sorry excuse, "Peace with Honor." As those choppers flew away the promises we made to our Montagnard brothers and their families, the real fighters in this war were dashed, and they would pay the ultimate price after we were no longer there to fight by their side. I'm sure they never got a granite wall constructed in their honor; no parade for them either!

The road through life for most of us is a meandering, bumpy highway... never smooth. I can tell you, from first-hand experience, that can especially be said for those of us who fought in the Vietnam War. We came from all over America... some drafted, as the draft was in full force during the 60's...some, like me, enlisted thinking that our country was fighting against the Communist takeover of a small,

far away, South East Asian nation with little to no resources or the national will to resist the onslaught of the neighboring North Vietnam Communist government. While the draft snared many who were not exempt, the boys from the heartland and the prairie states, most of the conscriptions came from the poorer areas of the inner cities. In talking with these "grunts," as they were known, I came to the conclusion that they didn't have a horse in this race and were in it for the short term and not too happy about it...one and done. Unfortunately, for more than 58,000 of these troops they really ended up one and done. We all became *Collateral Damage* in a political tragedy.

America got involved in the "conflict in South East Asia"...The Vietnam War...Sending the first contingent of fighting forces over in 1963. I was 19 years old at the time and just starting to feel the need to go and fight for "Mom and Apple Pie and my country's interests, " just as my grandfather, my father, my uncle and my cousins had done during, as they were known, the two "Great Wars". It is a long story of how I came to that conclusion and one that would eventually affect my moral compass, forged over 20 years by loving and devoted parents, family and friends. Before the 60's America was a strong nation of patriotic, hardworking, individuals, and families. It was only after the War in Vietnam started, that this country, her government, and her people began to unravel into an unruly mass of long-haired, sign carrying, anti-war, anti-American Soldier, citizens hiding behind their first Amendment right to free speech. The peace movement, defined by the death of every fallen soldier that fought for this country's liberty in that theatre of war, flourished and with the help of do nothing politicians, turned America away from being "The Land of the Free, Home of the Brave" to the Land of the "Freebee," No Place for the Brave,"... where we still, except for our military fighting men and women, remain to this day.

By then all the generals wanted to become politicians so they could have "THE POWER." They did anything the administration, and those that held the ear of the President told them to do. So instead of an Eisenhower or a Patton or a MacArthur, we got Westmoreland. His strategy, instead of scorched earth was "body count." He planned to count his way to victory. A real general, by the name of Vo Nguyen Giap, planned on using his time-honored strategy proven over a hundred years; a strategy that worked before and would now work again. He counted on, and received, the lack of resolve by the American people at home. Add

to the mix, his massive army's tenacity and steadfast determination. So, in spite of their massive losses, tiny, Communist, North Vietnam, gained victory over the formally, greatest military and industrial country in the world. You might say that "body count" was a metaphor for what was about to happen in the future of our once great nation.

From the time the first boots hit the ground in Vietnam, we were destined for failure. Not failure by the brave men and women that were either drafted or volunteered to go to Vietnam, but failure by America's ever more immoral and unethical politicians doing whatever was popular in order to get votes and re-election. The dye, or should I say, die, was set. If the bullets and shrapnel didn't get you then Agent Orange would. The young, America's best and brightest, were sacrificed on the altar of injustice at the expense of a system of government that had once been the model for the world but had now fallen into corrupt hands.

As Jesus was led to his death on the cross he must have felt much like the Americans who fought in the Vietnam War. He had been unjustly accused by heretic Hebrew politicians and savagely scourged. Then weakened by his loss of blood was made to carry his lumber on a circuitous journey through jeering crowds to the place of his execution. His Golgotha was our Golgotha...except our Golgotha was a place in Southeast Asia, called Vietnam; but the end result was the same. Politicians put us there, they watched us bleed as local long hairs cheered, made us carry our own cross, then drove the final nails into us. He was stabbed with a lance as he was dying, his last fluids ran from his body and he was gone... "forgive them Father for they know not what they have done."

The brilliant generals that led the troops in the Vietnam War were not interested in winning. Their mantra seemed to be that thing called "body count." A strange way to win a war by most accounts. The problem as I see it is that over 58,000 vinyl coffins were filled with Americans. That is the important number to remember, not the hundreds of thousands of estimated enemy killed. Death was never the real tragedy here. Sure, the families back home were hurt when they got their letter from "a grateful nation," but in a lot of respects, the dead were lucky because they wouldn't have to watch the United States of America slowly erode into a third-rate power on a world stage that they once dominated.

Every time we went out into the field I looked out into the dark jungle fringe and saw the yawning mouth of a giant Python. Like a siren, it flicked its tongue and begged us to enter, and we willingly did. The Python swallowed us whole, some were eaten and turned to fodder while the majority of us were shit out, with the rest of the dung, never to be the same again. We never had an inkling, not a conscious thought, that once we entered the jungles of Vietnam there was no going back. A normal life, as we knew it, was over and never to be recouped...
“Ignorance is bliss.”

“And on the third day, he rose into heaven.” Our last kick in the nuts came in 1975 when our politicians declared “Peace with Honor.” America rose into heaven from the roof of our embassy, not on the wings of angels, but on the rotor blades of helicopters.

This is the picture that those returning soldiers had to face every day of their lives. What about their lives? Remember, they had become *Collateral Damage*. Sure, some went back to school and tried to fit into what was now the new American way of life. Some of the more intense entered government covert service, but, most came home to a hostile, unrewarding, and ungrateful country. For the majority of returnee’s their lives were fraught with the demons of the Python. Fifty years after the war the results of that dynamic can be seen all around us. Un-kept, mentally challenged, alcoholic, drug addicted, vets are homeless by the thousands wanting nothing from the system that abandoned them. They get by panhandling for change, so they can buy their next bottle or get their next fix. Disease is rampant and dirty needles either kill them outright or, worse, give them AIDS so they can die another slow and painful death.

It’s a brand-new day. The doors to CLUB SAIGON just opened for business. Welcome to the nightmare!

Club Saigon

ONE

1968 was a bad year for me. '67 was bad enough, but '68 epitomized the word “bad.” 1968 was the year that only half of A Detachment 255, Camp Plei Me, came back from the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

I remember it as clear today, twenty-two years later, as I remembered it back then. Hanoi Hannah was shouting her shit over the single sideband radio, telling every swinging dick from Hanoi to Haiphong, how Ho Chi Minh was going to kick old A-255's ass off the face of the planet. At the time, I thought they were being boastful and tried to laugh it off, although I knew from our intelligence reports that the NVA had a large strike force in our AO (Area of Operation). When the smoke finally cleared that day, the NVA left 200 of their own, dead on our concertina

wire. That was a significant loss of manpower for any Army to absorb, but they absorbed the beating and still managed to remove us from that particular piece of real estate just as they'd predicted.

Dust-Off two-nine carted off six of my teammates that afternoon, which we stacked on the floor of the chopper like cord wood. The rest of us sat in nylon jump seats trying not to look at our dead buddies, watching out the open doors as the door gunners laid down heavy M-60 fire into our former compound, a compound which by then, was being overrun by hundreds of NVA soldiers. It's a sad sight to watch your colors being struck and replaced by another banner, but that's just what happened, and that sight stuck with me like a bad dream until this day.

A worse nightmare occurred on our arrival back in Kontum. It's bad enough having to be pulled out of your camp but it's worse yet to return to the "C" Team with a chopper load of filled body bags. Body bags are nothing more than vinyl repositories for leftover blood and gore. A single point of reference where, hopefully, a soldier's dog tags can be located amongst the miscellaneous body parts... a receptacle so GRU (Grave Registration Unit) can pour the contents into a standard military issue coffin filled with bags of ice and send the body home for a decent, closed casket, burial.

There were six bags brought to GRU that afternoon and I had to stand around for a couple of hours until all the remains were identified. Sgt. Mack "Blaster" Adams, our demolition man; Spec. Five Nelson Rotun, medic; SFC "Blackjack" Baker, our "First Shirt"; Lieutenant "Baby David" Collins, XO; "Daiwe" Jackson, our Commanding Officer, and Staff Sergeant "Gunner" McConnell, a weapons specialist. Six good men that would never drink another brew, go to another family picnic or sire another child. Six more bodies, part of the fifty-eight thousand or so, that bit the bullet for an unpopular cause.

Back in the states, the hippies were burning the flag, the Buddhists were burning themselves, and Jane Fonda was beginning to sound, and look, more and more like Hanoi Hannah. It was one hell of a war and after three tours of duty, I was ready for a permanent R & R. It was February '69, that was the date I officially retired from Uncle Sam's finest, the best part of a very "bad" year. All I wanted to do was go home and drink some real beer, get laid by a round-eyed girl, and kick some hippie ass. I accomplished all three within eight hours of getting off the plane.



TWO

There was something familiar about the crime scene. I was working homicide on the night watch out of the Rampart Division.

For twenty-two years after his tours of duty working for Uncle Sam, Police Detective Jerry Andrews, formerly of Special Forces A Detachments A-243 and A-255, had been an L.A. cop. Twenty-two years of decent pay, long hours, and no home life. Three more years and he could kiss this shit goodbye, take a seventy percent retirement, and head south for a leisurely Baja retirement.

Twenty-two years on the L.A. Police Force, but my mind told me that I had seen all this before. The concrete felt soft, like the floor of the jungle, and this dead Vietnamese I found myself looking down on, looked like “Charley.”

“Shit, you saw one you saw them all,” I muttered under my breath. “Just another dead Vietnamese,” I said as I approached the crime scene at the end of a dingy, garbage infested alley, in the heart of L.A.'s “Little Saigon.”

The call had come into my office a little after eight a.m. that morning. The caller didn't identify himself, he just said in a low raspy voice, “You'll find a dead Vietnamese at the end of Baker's Alley. You'll have a tough time distinguishing him from the other garbage in the alley, but if you don't get there for an hour or so, you should be able to follow your nose to him.” That's all there was, no name to tag onto the mysterious caller. No chance to run a trace because the mysterious caller had only been on the line less than thirty seconds. It was a man's voice, even though he was obviously trying to disguise it... I was sure of that. Not much to go

on, but I grabbed my coffee and headed for the door letting my supervisor, Captain Henry Davis know I was going to Little Saigon to investigate another homicide.

“What've you got Jerry,” he yelled as I ran past his office. “Just got a tip that another Vietnamese has been killed in Little Saigon. I'm on my way to check it out. Care to come along?” I knew the Captain wouldn't want to come. He had been flying his desk for over five years and was just six months and a wake-up call from a full retirement. “No way, I've got too many reports to check out, but thanks for asking, Jerry.”

As I approached the body that same voice, that told me I had seen all this before, began to turn on like a leaky faucet. It was like a warning light on the dashboard of my car, only I didn't need to add oil, and from the looks of the blood on the concrete, this stiff was long past needing a transfusion.

Another car pulled into the alley and disgorged a police photographer who went by the name of “Smiley.” He immediately set to work taking pictures of the crime scene. He took shots of the entrance to the alley, the garbage cans, and the body from every conceivable angle. The guy used more film on this one shoot than Life Magazine used to photograph the fall of Saigon in 75'. “Any other shots you want me to take Jerry,” he said, as he reloaded his camera for the fourth time.

“Yeah Smiley, come over here and let's roll the body over for some shots of his other side.” Smiley gently laid down his camera then took hold of both of the victim's feet and abruptly turned him over as easy as flipping a fried egg. “Thanks, Smiley,” I said, amazed by his apparent strength.

“No problem Jerry, anything to help the macho homicide squad.” He was talking to me but his eyes were looking elsewhere. I followed his gaze to the blood encrusted head of the victim. “Holy shit, his friggin ear's gone,” I said, with more than a little apprehension in my voice. “No shit, Sherlock. Now, move out of my

way so I can shoot up the rest of this film,” said Smiley with his usual nonchalance.

I moved back to let Smiley finish his work. The County Coroners ambulance arrived, and I held them back until Smiley was done with his shoot. I couldn't get the stiff off my mind. His throat was slit, long and deep, and one of his ears was missing. *Who the hell would take a guy's ear for a souvenir*, I thought, as I continued to keep the coroner's team from carting off the body. My internal alarm went off again, only, this time, I flashed back to Nam. It was 1968 again and I was standing at a Vietnamese bar having a brew.

Pleiku City was the provincial capital of a group of small farming communities in the central highlands of Vietnam. It was also the headquarters of our “B” Team. Our “A” Team had been invited in for a reception in honor of an ARVN Colonel by the name of Vinh Ho. ARVN was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, our supposed counterparts. The idea was that we were supposed to advise, and they were supposed to fight, except it never seemed to work out that way. It seemed that every time we were in a firefight, they disappeared like Harry Houdini's rabbit. When the smoke of battle cleared, we would be licking our wounds, and policing up our dead, while the ARVN were nowhere to be seen. Blaster used to say, “That's why those little fellers were issued tennis shoes, so they could run at the first sound of battle.” Well, Blaster may not have been the most articulate of men, but he was insightful when it came to the ARVN's.

The reception was mandatory or none of us would have been there, but since it was required that we be there, well, no sense not drinking their booze and having a good time. I remember, the party was held at the Club Saigon, a small but elegant hole in the wall, with a nice bar, enough room for twelve SF Troopers, and a small contingent of Vietnamese that always made up the entourage of Vinh Ho. We

partied hard, and long into the night. There was an endless supply of good booze, and Vietnamese party girls more than willing to get a leg over a hard GI. It was about two a.m. when I heard the ruckus out behind the Club. Scuffling and shouts in both Vietnamese and English, then a loud report from, what sounded to me like, a forty-five automatic. I quickly looked around the room, almost everyone was shit-faced and hadn't heard a thing. I took a mental inventory of the personnel in the room. Just as I suspected,Gunner McConnell, the team's light weapon's specialist, wasn't there; and he always carried his forty-five Auto Mag in a shoulder holster under his shirt. I slid out through a rear door and into the alley behind the club, holding to the shadows like a black spot on a dark wall.

A single light illuminated the alley's recesses, not much, but enough so that I could make out Gunner's large bulk standing over a motionless body. "Gunner, is that you?" "Sure, is Jerry, come over and look what I've got." "What the fuck have you done, Gunner?" I shouted. "Not much, just something I've been wanting to do for the last two years." I inched closer. "What have you done, Gunner?"

"Just killed me one of those chicken-shit ARVN's; shot him, slit his throat and sliced off a piece to remember him by."

He was standing in front of me with a shit-eating grin on his face, holding a bloody ear out in front of him. "We're in for it now, Gunner. It's bad enough killing an ARVN, but shit, did you have to mutilate the body?"

"I been thinking about this for a long time Jerry. I thought about it every time these bastards cut and ran on us in the field. Yeah, I've been thinking about it for a real long time. See....he's a Buddhist." Gunner reached down and jerked the dead ARVN's head up by pulling on the chain that held his religious medallion. "Can't go to Buddha heaven if he can't hear the gongs."

It occurred to me at that moment to ask Gunner why he also didn't cut off the ARVN's nose. I reasoned, that burning incense was such a big part of their religion,

and that way he couldn't smell, either, but I thought better of it and kept my mouth shut, not wanting to give him any more, bright ideas. I looked down at the carnage in front of me. The dead ARVN appeared to be staring at me through his dead eyes. It was then that I noticed the card laying on his chest...It was an ace of spades with a skull and crossbones emblazoned across its face. Gunner had put a "death Card" on his victim.

"Brilliant Gunner, fucking brilliant. Now what do we do" I said? Gunner looked at me with his big, all-absorbing, Irish, eyes and just shrugged his shoulders. "It's a rhetorical question, Gunner, the answer is as obvious as the ears still left on your head.... about a hundred fucking years in the Long Binh Jail, that's what we do."

"No way, Jerry. The way I figure it, we just stuff him into one of these trash cans and go back to the party. By the time, they find this guy we'll be back at the "A" Team and they'll think Charley killed him for the few piasters' he had in his pockets."

"You mean you stole his money too?"

"Yeah, part of my plan.... fuckin brilliant huh?"

So, we stuffed him into a fifty-five-gallon drum, covered him with trash and went back to the party, just the way Gunner planned it. Never did hear anything from that ARVN Colonel, and never spent a day in the LBJ.

I pulled the sheet back and looked one more time. The right ear was gone, just like the other six victims before him. The M.O. was the same in each case. The victims had all been Vietnamese males, all had their throats slashed, and all had their right ears severed. "*Gunner*", the name popped into my brain like a red light going on at an intersection. They all looked just like the dead ARVN back in Pleiku; the one I helped stuff into the fifty-five-gallon drum so many years ago....

but Gunner had been dead for over twenty years, I brought the body into GRU myself.

I wish I could put the fucking war behind me but it kept filling my head at the most inconvenient times. No way could this series of killings be related, but, try as I might, my inner voice wouldn't shut up. It just kept droning into my ears and wouldn't let me solve this crime using the standard deductive techniques that I'd been taught since I'd been with the LAPD.



THREE

The noise in “cop” bars is generally deafening, but I always did my best thinking at the 44 Magnum. The bar, located at #44 Magnum Street was the favorite watering hole of many of my off-duty compadres, a place for them to drown out the memories of shitty days and endless nights. The bartender, a sleazy, foul-mouthed Spaniard by the name of Armando Perez, could always be counted on to supply me with the latest rumors or act as my father confessor, whichever was appropriate at the time.

“Hey Jerry, I hear another VC was slashed in Baker's Alley today?”

“Armando, where did you hear that?”

“A little fuckin bird told me, Jerry. You ready for another blast?”

“Yeah, and this time, make it a double.” I'd been hitting the scotch real heavy lately and I made a mental note to stop drinking as soon as I solved this case.

Armando leaned across the bar toward my ear, causing me to back away momentarily. “Shit Jerry, I ain't no faggot. I wasn't trying to nibble on your ear, or nothing'.”

“I don't believe you, Mondo, now what's the big secret you were trying to tell me?”

“Jerry, you see that guy at the end of the bar?”

“You mean the bearded guy that looks kind of down in the mouth and long in the tooth?”

“Yeah, that's him. He's the one that told me about the dead Vietnamese. He says he knows you; you and he used to be on the same team or something. No offense Jerry, but you don't look like any athlete to me.”

I looked down into my half empty glass, then casually stole a glance down to the end of the crowded bar. It had been so many years, and they all had changed so much. Could that really be one of my old teammates? The guy looked to be about six feet four and two hundred twenty-five pounds. He had hams for hands and gunboats for feet. As he leaned forward to take another swig of his drink, I noticed his thick hair and beard, a beard now gone salt and pepper from age or circumstances. *Circumstances, most likely*, I thought. His nose was large, and I could see the remnants of a long jagged scar running from his nose down his darkly tanned cheek.

The team... after all the nightmares I should be able to place each of the team members as easily as I could identify the twelve apostles at the last supper. Come to think of it, that would be just as tough since I hadn't been to church in over ten years. I leaned back and took a long swallow of my scotch, draining the glass and feeling the pleasing, burning sensation all the way down into the pit of my stomach.

It was 1968. We were all sitting outside the team house having a 3.2 brew when our commo man, William “Sweet Willy” Beal, comes staggering out the door with his hands over his face and falls head first into the dirt. Sweet Willy was

a big old' southern boy from Dothan Alabama. He was a star basketball player at Virginia Military Institute before he decided to enlist as a grunt in Uncle Sam's finest. To hear Sweet Willy tell it, he had made the "All World" team as a forward in his junior year at VMI. My guess from the looks of him was that he wished he had stayed on and graduated, at least then he would have been an officer with some status, instead of a buck sergeant that was always getting his dick dragged in the dirt.

As I remembered it, Gunner McConnell was standing in the doorway of the team house, looking down in disgust at his fallen teammate, while he picked his front teeth with his Kabar Knife. "That ought to teach you to fuck with me, Sweet Willy. From now on you're going to be so ugly you wouldn't be able to get a date with a Saigon whore."

Willy looked up and for the first time, I saw what Gunner was talking about. Gunner had slashed Willy across the nose and cheek with his knife leaving a jagged red trail down the enlisted man's previously unblemished face. "Why'd you go and do that Gunner, I didn't mean anything personal by what I said?"

"Nothing personal was taken, I just felt like carving me a piece of white meat for lunch today. Maybe the next time you start shooting your mouth off you'll look in the mirror, then think twice about what you're going to say."

Now, Sweet Willy was no pussy, and it was unlike him to take any shit from anyone, that's when I see his hand inching under his fatigue jacket for the Browning Nine MM that we all knew he kept in a shoulder holster. I jumped between them and grabbed his hand before he could reach the pistol. "I think we better get you into Pleiku Willy before you get any uglier."

"Yeah, O.K. Jerry, and you ain't heard the last from me, Gunner."

I walked over to the man at the end of the bar. Willy, Willy Beal, is that you?" "None other than, my man, and who might you be?"

“Don’t you recognize me, Willy, it's Jerry Andrews, A-Detachment 255?”

“Yeah, Jerry. Boy, do you look different. I heard you were doing a tour with the LAPD so I put out the word that I was looking for you.”

“That's what I heard, Willy. How've you been doing?”

“Well, as you can see, probably not too good by your standards.”

Willy's tattered, threadbare, clothes and unshaved sallow face said it all. How many times had I seen Vietnam Vet's that looked like my old pal Willy? More times than I could count, or even would want too. They spend two, maybe three tours in the Nam and they come out different. They are no longer the clean-cut, good and moral kids that went over the pond hoping to rid the world of Communism and do it like their fathers had in WWII...except their fathers came home to brass bands and accolades from a grateful nation. A nation that applauded their efforts all the way from the towns and villages of Europe to the beaches and jungles of the South Pacific.

They got a grand parade, and what did guys like me, and Willy get? We got a bunch of long haired hippie freaks carrying anti-war, anti-American, signs instead of M-16's, and burning flags instead of carrying them. We got called, “baby killer” and spit on for our efforts, on what we thought, was their behalf. The worm had turned in our once proud country in the short span of a few years.

Willy, and guys like him, came home damaged. They could not assimilate back into society. For some, they turned to drugs, for others, it was alcohol, but for all, it was a deep depression, resentment, and a feeling of loss. For those of us with a different mindset, we could find jobs. “Fake it so you can make it” was our mantra, our battle cry! For others like Willy, his next tour, the one through life, would be a long series of endless nightmares and the drug and alcohol induced misery that accompanied his search for the meaning to it all. In the end, it was not so much where he was but what he had become, and that's what drove his self-pity

and loathing. His only peace would be found at the end of his earthly trail with no Purple Heart for the injury he had endured.

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It was 1968. We were all sitting outside the team house having a 3.2 brew when our commo man, William “Sweet Willy” Beal, comes staggering out the door with his hands over his face and falls head first into the dirt. Sweet Willy was a big old' southern boy from Dothan Alabama. He was a star basketball player at Virginia Military Institute before he decided to enlist as a grunt in Uncle Sam's

finest. To hear Sweet Willy tell it, he had made the “All World” team as a forward in his junior year at VMI. My guess from the looks of him was that he wished he had stayed on and graduated, at least then he would have been an officer with some status, instead of a buck sergeant that was always getting his dick dragged in the dirt.

As I remembered it, Gunner McConnell was standing in the doorway of the team house, looking down in disgust at his fallen teammate, while he picked his front teeth with his Kabar Knife. “That ought to teach you to fuck with me, Sweet Willy. From now on you're going to be so ugly you wouldn't be able to get a date with a Saigon whore.”

Willy looked up and for the first time, I saw what Gunner was talking about. Gunner had slashed Willy across the nose and cheek with his knife leaving a jagged red trail down the enlisted man's previously unblemished face. “Why'd you go and do that Gunner, I didn't mean anything personal by what I said?”

“Nothing personal was taken, I just felt like carving me a piece of white meat for lunch today. Maybe the next time you start shooting your mouth off you'll look in the mirror, then think twice about what you're going to say.”

Now, Sweet Willy was no pussy, and it was unlike him to take any shit from anyone, that's when I see his hand inching under his fatigue jacket for the Browning Nine MM that we all knew he kept in a shoulder holster. I jumped between them and grabbed his hand before he could reach the pistol. “I think we better get you into Pleiku Willy before you get any uglier.”

“Yeah, O.K. Jerry, and you ain't heard the last from me, Gunner.”

I walked over to the man at the end of the bar. Willy, Willy Beal, is that you?” “None other than, my man, and who might you be?”

“Don't you recognize me, Willy, it's Jerry Andrews, A-Detachment 255?”

“Yeah, Jerry. Boy, do you look different. I heard you were doing a tour with the LAPD, so I put out the word that I was looking for you.”

“That's what I heard, Willy. How've you been doing?”

“Well, as you can see, probably not too good by your standards.”

Willy's tattered, threadbare, clothes and unshaved sallow face said it all. How many times had I seen Vietnam Vet's that looked like my old pal Willy? More times than I could count, or even would want too. They spend two, maybe three tours in the Nam and they come out different. They are no longer the clean-cut, good and moral kids that went over the pond hoping to rid the world of Communism and do it like their fathers had in WWII...except their fathers came home to brass bands and accolades from a grateful nation. A nation that applauded their efforts all the way from the towns and villages of Europe to the beaches and jungles of the South Pacific.

They got a grand parade, and what did guys like me, and Willy get? We got a bunch of long haired hippie freaks carrying anti-war, anti-American, signs instead of M-16's, and burning flags instead of carrying them. We got called, “baby killer” and spit on for our efforts, on what we thought, was their behalf. The worm had turned in our once proud country in the short span of a few years.

Willy, and guys like him, came home damaged. They could not assimilate back into society. For some, they turned to drugs, for others, it was alcohol, but for all, it was a deep depression, resentment, and a feeling of loss. For those of us with a different mindset, we could find jobs. “Fake it so you can make it” was our mantra, our battle cry! For others like Willy, his next tour, the one through life, would be a long series of endless nightmares and the drug and alcohol induced misery that accompanied his search for the meaning to it all. In the end, it was not so much where he was but what he had become, and that's what drove his self-pity

and loathing. His only peace would be found at the end of his earthly trail with no Purple Heart for the injury he had endured.

It was time to change the subject and find out why Willy was trying so hard to get hold of me after all these years. “Why did you need to get hold of me buddy boy?”

“You been reading the newspapers lately regarding the Little Saigon murders, Jerry? “Choosing not to let on that I was the lead investigating officer I just nodded in a non-committal fashion. “What about them, Willy? You haven't looked me up to confess, have you?”

“You know better than that Jerry, these murders are not my style. We do know someone that use to operate like that, I mean, cutting off ears and the like.”

“Shit Willy, have you lost it altogether? You're not still pissed because Gunner scarred you that time, besides I delivered his remains to GRU after Charley kicked our asses all over our compound.” I looked at Willy, his face was screwed into a tight ball as if he was thinking real hard, but as far as his ability to think, I was convinced he was two beers short of a six-pack. “Mondo, get my friend another beer, and back it up with some of your finest bourbon,” I remembered back at the team house Willy use to love “boiler-makers”. “A real man's drink,” he use to say to the rest of us.

“Thanks, Jerry. You know it never crossed my mind that he died that day. I guess I really am losing it.”

“I'm sorry Willy, I didn't mean to insult you. Still pals?” I offered my open hand in Willy's direction and he took it, his face crinkling around his scarred cheek and his eyes in as much of a smile as he was capable of, at that moment.

Willy was right of course, I had immediately thought about Gunner right after I was assigned to the case, but Gunner was as cold as a quartered side of beef

in a meat locker. I pictured him in my mind in that bloody body bag. I saw the skulls head ring he wore on his right hand. I saw his dog tags protruding from what was left of his face. I took his body home to his parents and stood by them as his coffin was lowered into the ground. I even threw a handful of dirt on my old friend, before saluting and wishing him bon voyage into the great unknown. I remember thinking, just before I left the cemetery that day; *When Gunner enters hell, and I was sure he would, the first thing that's going to happen to him is they're going to cut his ears off.* I remember how I smiled to myself at the thought of him walking around with two holes in his head where his ears use to be.

“You hear from any of the other team members, Willy?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I saw “Preacher.” I saw him at the V.A. Hospital in Santa Monica, last time I was in detox. The Preacher was sure in a bad way. The doc said he had an advanced case of AIDS, probably got it from a dirty needle. Old Preacher was heavy into drugs since he got out of the service. I heard he started taking drugs right after Charley overran our camp that night. He was Just never the same after that. None of us were I guess, although you look like you been doing OK.”

“Yeah, I'm fine, but think back, when was the last time you saw Preacher, Willy?”

“Must have been about three weeks ago, but like I said, he sure looked bad, and he'd lost a lot of weight. He was all skin and bones, he was, his eyes looked like two piss holes in the snow, all of his hair was gone, and he didn't recognize me. The fact is, he was kind of hallucinating. Kept saying “Claymore, look out for the Claymore,” or something like that. He kept falling in, then out of his trance. Oh yeah, he also kept muttering “Bangkok,” over and over. Must have been thinking of one of his famous Rest and Recuperation holidays that he always used to tell us about.”

“Yeah, the Preacher was definitely good at telling us about his R & R's. Remember when he went to Bangkok on a three-day pass and didn't come back for two weeks?”

“Yeah, he told us some cockamamie story about losing all his money and I.D. then posing as an undercover CIA Agent and uncovering a prostitution ring.”

“Yeah, and to make it even more believable, he came back to camp wearing the brightest Hawaiian silk shirt you ever saw.”

“Yeah, and more gold chains around his neck than Mr. “T.” He must have flown back to camp via Hollywood where he stopped in and had Edith Head put together his costume.”

“Daiwe went for it hook, line, and sinker, which just didn't figure to me. You'd have thought he would ask Preacher for his CIA contact, so he could call and verify his story.”

“He did tell Daiwe to call, and the number he gave him was a telephone booth in Pleiku, where yours truly was stationed waiting for the phone to ring. The conversation went something like this... Yes, Captain. No, I can't tell you if I'm attached to the CIA. I can't tell you whether I know a soldier by the nickname of Preacher, but someone resembling the description you gave me has done undercover work for us in the past, in fact, he is our resident expert on prostitution and we're thinking of asking for him full time.”

“You got to be shitting me, Willy....and Daiwe bought that story?”

“Like I said before, hook, line, and sinker, Jerry.”

“Yeah, those were the days alright.” After we had a good laugh I asked Willy, “Look, Willy, you think Preacher is still in the Santa Monica VA Hospital. I might want to talk with him?”

“From the way he looked the last time I saw him, he's either in that hospital or in the ground. He was really bad off, Jerry.”

“Thanks, Willy, it was nice seeing you again, but I've got to run. Here's my card, call me if you get the chance and we can get together and flush down some old toilets of memory lane.” I reached in my wallet and wrapped one of my LAPD cards in a twenty-dollar bill and passed it to Willy, wondering if I'd ever see him again.

“Thanks, Jerry,” he said, taking the bill and the card and slipping them into his inner coat pocket. “We definitely will see each other again,” he said as he got off his barstool and headed for the exit.



ELEVEN

It was just after midnight. The lights in Little Saigon burned brightly, blinking like a hypnotist's strobe. Brilliant and enticingly seductive, luring men off the street and into the bowels of the myriad of sleazy bars and sex clubs that lined the filthy avenue.

Bakers Alley offered the only respite from the glare and, often as not, was an excellent place to purchase dope, get a quick blow job, or, if you were real unlucky, get rolled. The shadows faded from gray to black as you got farther down the alley and closer to the back door of the Club Saigon. The single light fixture that hung over the door had long since had the lamp removed, and nobody cared enough to replace it.

It was a quarter past midnight when Johnny Hong, the mixed-race Vietnamese/Chinese dishwasher stood on the top step of the landing leaning against the greasy handrail. Every two hours he was allowed a smoke break, which

he took with timed regularity. "I ought to get smart and quit smoking these," he mumbled under his breath in pigeon English. "Fuckin' going to kill me one these days." Johnny tossed the unfiltered butt he had between his lips unceremoniously down the stairs, where it landed on a pile of butts that had built up during the night. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his pack, frantically fingering inside before cursing and throwing the empty pack onto the pile of butts at the bottom of the stair. "Son-of-a-bitch, I've got to stop this habit."

"Have one of mine, friend." A hairy, tattooed arm reached out of the shadows next to the stairs and dangled a cigarette in front of Johnny's face.

Johnny Hong was instinctively wary, especially of strangers that lingered in the shadows, but his addiction overwhelmed his sense of fear. His instinct for self-preservation was strong, but so was his immediate need for a nicotine fix.

"Thanks, stranger," he said as he reached out for the obnoxious weed.

In a heartbeat, the tattooed arm grabbed Johnny Hong's wrist and clamped him in a vice-like grip. In one swift motion, Johnny's body was swept over the rail and sent sailing across the dark alley, where he finally came to rest after his head struck the brick wall of the building opposite the Club Saigon. He could feel the sticky, warm ooze, swarming over his temples, around his nose and down into his mouth. He tasted the salt of his own blood but still remained conscious. His eyes were unfocused and glassy. He tried to look up and recognize his assailant, but as he lifted his head he felt a booted foot thud hard into his rib cage. *This fucking habit's going to kill me* he thought, as the boot hit the side of his jaw, shattering it, and spreading his teeth across the alley like twenty dice, all rolling craps at the same time.

The thrill of the kill. Stalking your victim. Taking him down until the awareness of impending death becomes his reality, and fear manifests itself in a death mask, replacing a once serene face. How many times had he killed like this?

Twenty, thirty, maybe fifty over the past twenty-five years. Who counts when you're having so much fun. The victims fear was a strong narcotic. That's what he was hooked on; his victims fear. He kept each one alive for a long time. He was slow and meticulous in the way he carved them up. He liked to save the ear for last. Always, the ear was last to go. Then he slit the victim's throat and left him to slowly bleed to death on the pavement made sticky with the victim's own blood.

Johnny Hong hung on and wished that he'd worked through his last break. The warm blood that dripped onto his hands felt like the unctuous greasy dishwater that was his livelihood, but the pain in his throbbing head and tortured breathing told him he wasn't in his boss's kitchen. First, his eyes looked fearfully up in the direction of the last kick. His face felt like he'd been force fed a brick. He was scared, real scared. He pushed himself up on one elbow and started to beg.

The fear was now overwhelming. When they started to beg it was time to feed the bulldog. Reaching into his fatigue pockets he pulled out a long knife. With the accuracy of a surgeon he slashed out, cutting the wrist tendons in Johnny Hong's arm. Johnny crumbled to the pavement again. "I can always tell when the fear takes over. I can smell it," he said, as he leaned over Johnny. "I could smell it in Nam and I can smell it now. You stink when you're scared." He reached over with his knife and drew it across Johnny's face, leaving a deep fissure. "Your momma's going to want a closed casket funeral for you when I'm done, boy.....Just like some of my buddies got."

Johnny tried to talk, but only managed to spit out a tooth. The words he wanted to say couldn't pass his swelling tongue. He was scared shitless and he didn't want to die. He would do anything to stay alive, but the tug on his ear told him that his worse fear had been realized. The killer that was terrorizing Little Saigon had him by the short hairs, and he wouldn't survive.

The ear came off and the killer held it aloft to revel in its horrible beauty. It was a contradiction of terms, a dichotomy of the anatomy. He rubbed the bloody appendage all over his face licking the accumulated blood from his lips with the joy of a boy's first kill while hunting with his dad.

Johnny grasped the side of his head with both hands where he once had an ear. The fear... his whimpers were a cacophony of horror. He looked up into the face of his tormentor. He saw the knife raised high, an errant light from a passing car gleaming off the blade. He felt the hard steel drawn against his pulsing throat. He felt the warm fluid spurting up onto his face then retreating down the front of his shirt. He saw a black curtain come down over his eyes. He never felt the pressure from the ring as it pushed roughly into his skin.



I had several cases in my past investigations that required the use of a pin chart. These charts were helpful in visualizing crime patterns, especially when clues were not readily apparent. As I entered Rampart I was considering setting one up for this case, in the cramped cubbyhole, that I laughingly referred to, as my office.

The map of the downtown area that I generally patrolled hung on the wall that faced my desk. It stared back at me like a pockmarked teenager on a chocolate binge. I pulled the red-tipped pins that marked my last major case and replaced them in the top drawer of my gray Steelcase desk. *I wonder why I didn't pull these pins a long time ago*, I thought. The case, a string of burglaries, had been solved by our squad over two years ago.

Right now, I have six positive M.O.'s that linked these killings, but nothing in the way of solid evidence. Lots of hunches but no substance. Lots of earless

bodies but no killer. Lots of ideas and persons of interest, but no solid clues and only one possible suspect that I thought was placed in a body bag twenty-two years ago. *Brilliant detective work*, I thought, *your only suspect to an ongoing murder investigation, is a dead man*. I'd better keep this theory to myself or I'll be laughed out of the station house and the 44 Magnum.

Since all the murder victims were Vietnamese, Jerry pulled a plastic box of yellow stickpins from his desk drawer and began putting them on the map. His tour of duty had made him slightly racist when it came to Vietnamese and other Asians, a tendency which he tried to conceal. When he finished, he stepped back to try and see the "Big Picture". "Let's see. Six bodies all located in the one square mile area that encompassed Little Saigon. Similarities. Each body was found in an alley, off Main Street. Each body was missing the right ear. Mental note...check with the Coroner and see if he can determine if the killer is left or right handed. Each body was a young Vietnamese male, age thirty to forty. Each body showed signs of an extreme beating and the corpses had their throats slit.

Dissimilarities. According to the initial Coroner's reports, some of the victims were dead before their throats were slit. All those bodies, and not so much as a fingerprint of the killer at any of the crime scenes. Conclusion, the killer wore gloves.

"Nice map, Jerry. Looks like from the number of pins, and the area you've got outlined, you're working on the Little Saigon killings?"

"A nice piece of detective work, Captain. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yeah. Add another pin in Bakers Alley. I just got a report that they found another stiff behind the Club Saigon. Poor bastard got the shit kicked out of him before his ear was cut off and his throat was slit. Check with the Coroner's office

in the morning, maybe they can come up with something you can use to nail this guy.”

“Got any better news, Henry; Like maybe, Ed McMahon came by to see me on my lunch hour and I'm wealthy enough now to quit this fucking job?”

“You're getting kind of seedy. Why don't you knock off and try again tomorrow? Maybe your outlook will be brighter after you've knocked back a few brews with the boys and had a good night's sleep?”

“Thanks for the advice, Dr. Davis. See you in the morning.”

I was hoping that Willy Beal would be at the 44 Magnum, but as luck would have it he wasn't. I swept through the door and quickly looked around, but Willy B. was nowhere in sight. I remember back in Nam, Blackjack Baker use to say, “you know Jerry, if it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all.” Truer words were never spoken, because when I last saw Baker, what was left of him was filling up a body bag.

“Yo, Mondo, seen my buddy Willy Beal, today?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen him for the past couple of days. What can I get you to drink amigo, the regular?”

“Yeah, and make it a double.”

Mondo put a napkin in front of me and leaned closer as he delivered the drink. “Say, Jerry, I read in the Times that another Vietnamese got wasted in Little Saigon last night?”

“Yeah, you heard right Mondo. What of it?”

“Nothing, it just seems odd to me that, and don't take this wrong, but Willy B. seems real interested in the killings and he's never here when they occur, but you can bet he'll be here in a day or so. Don't get mad. Just an observation.”

“Look, Mondo, in case you haven't noticed, I'm the detective and you're the bartender.” I drank the double scotch in one quick gulp, savoring the burning liquid as it made its way to my empty stomach and abruptly pushed the glass toward Armando to emphasize my point!

“Hey, Jerry, no offense man, I just thought it might be worth looking into.”

“I'll bring by an application for employment on Monday Mondo, I hear we can use some bilingual recruits in East L.A.” With his fresh drink in front of him, Jerry Andrews mulled over in his mind what the bartender had just said. His little inner voice came on. *He's right you know. There just may be a connection, but on the other hand, I gave Willy B. a twenty. He could just coincidentally be out drinking it up right now.* Try as I may I couldn't push the coincidence out of my head. I started to get a migraine just like when I thought of my ex-wife, Mona, only, this time, I was getting screwed and not getting laid.

I looked at my watch, it was six p.m. “Mondo can I use the bar phone for a minute?”

“Hey, Jerry do I look like some fucking telephone operator or what? Remember me I'm just the bartender.”

“Look, Mondo, I'm sorry about the remarks, now how about giving me the phone before I rip your lungs out without anesthetizing you.”

“Hey amigo, no need to act tough,” he said, as he shoved the phone unceremoniously in front of me.

I reached into my coat pocket and retrieved my address book and quickly located the home phone number of Captain Davis. I dialed, and after three rings it was picked up. The gruff “Hello” on the other end of the line told me that I was speaking to Henry Davis. “Henry it's me, Jerry Andrews.”

“What the fuck are you calling me at home for Jerry, isn't anything sacred anymore. Whatever happened to a man's home being his castle? Is it after working hours or am I having a nightmare?”

“Whoa Cap. In answer to your questions,...no, yes, yes, no? What I really need from you is your approval for me to put on twenty-four-hour surveillance for a suspect in the multiple killings case.”

“You mean you actually have a suspect detective?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I don't have any hard evidence yet, but I've got a hunch about this one guy that may help us solve this case.”

“Let me get this straight Andrews. You want me to commit our overworked and undermanned unit to overtime because you have a hunch?”

“Yeah, Cap, that about sums it up.”

“You've got to give me more than that to justify O.T. Jerry. I'll ask you again; do you have any hard evidence to support your position?”

“No.”

“Then, your answer is the same as mine.”

“Please, Cap, you've got to give me at least, a few days of surveillance.”

“Read my lips, Jerry. I Don't GOT to give you anything and that's exactly what you're going to get.... NOTHING. Now, if you're done with this subject, how about letting me get back to bed.”

I found myself starting to talk into a telephone that had suddenly, if the buzzing was any indication, gone dead in my hand. “That son-of-a-bitch,” I shouted as I slammed the receiver back into the cradle and shoved the phone across the bar and into the waiting hands of Mondo.

“Care for another drink, amigo. From the look on your face, you just got fed a raft of shit. Always good to wash down shit with a scotch or a cold beer.”

“Very astute of you, Mondo. I'll take your suggestion with a bourbon chaser.”

“A boiler maker. A man after my own heart. That's the old Jerry that I know and admire.”

I sat back with my drink trying to piece together what little information I had on this case. Gunner McConnell use to like boilermakers. I remember the first time I had one. Gunner and I were sitting in the team house just having a 3.2 brew and, of course, Gunner takes out his bottle of Jack Daniels and pours us each a two-finger shot. I was new in the country then and Gunner use to call me “Cherry”. “Hey Cherry, ever try a boilermaker?”

“Of course, I have, and don't call me Cherry anymore unless you....” My own words hung in the air like a fart in the wind and I knew I'd made a mistake as soon as the words left my mouth.

Old Gunner, he smiles at me, as he raises up from his stool, grinning down with a maniacal look that would make Dr. Jekyll bolt and run. I held my ground, or should I say, my seat, trying not to make direct eye contact with Sgt. Gunner McConnell. “What say we have another boilermaker and play a game Cherry?”

By now some of the other guys in the team house had noticed a confrontation brewing and were getting real interested in our conversation. As much as I didn't want too, I had to face up to the bastard now, or forever be his whipping boy. “What've you got in mind Sgt. McConnell?” It was easier on my psyche to call him by his Christian name than GUNNER, which was intimidating, to say the least.

“You ever play Vietnamese mumbly peg, Cherry?”

I remembered when I was a kid I use to play regular mumbly peg. My mind drifted back to a time when I was twelve and I played it in the school yard with

some of my friends. Two guys face each other and alternately throw pocket knives into the ground outside of each other's feet. Each time the knife sticks you had to move your foot out to where the knife had stuck until you were stretched out so far you were sure that the only thing holding your legs on was your scrotum. Whoever stretched last, won.... although usually both players hurt so bad that nobody really won. That was the mumbly peg that I knew. "No Sgt. McConnell, I can't say that I have!"

He passed me my third boilemaker, then explained Vietnamese mumbly peg. "The rules are the same as regular mumbly peg Cherry, except each time you throw your knife, you drink another boilemaker."

"Sounds easy to me Gunn... I mean, Sgt. If I win, no when I win, you don't call me Cherry anymore," I slurred.

"It's a deal, Cherry. You bring a few brews and I'll bring out the J.D.," he said as he grabbed the half empty bottle from the bar top and headed through the door. "We'll discuss what I win, if, and when, the time comes, Cherry."

"Deal," I said as I confidently grabbed a six-pack from the refrigerator and followed him out into the afternoon sun.

We faced each other, feet together, at attention. "You can have the first toss Cherry," said Gunner with his usual arrogance and sinister smile.

I looked him dead in the eye, took out my buck folding hunter and deftly tossed it three feet to his left, where it stuck in the soft earth. He moved his boot over to where the knife stuck in the ground, then handed me a boilemaker, which he had poured out himself. He eyed me as I drank, making sure I finished the foul-tasting mixture.

Gunner then takes out his Kabar and runs the blade over his thumb, purposely drawing blood. He sucked the blood from his thumb trying, and

succeeding, in further intimidating me. Gunner leaned over and tossed the Kabar about four feet, where to my chagrin, it stuck.

Between the booze and the sun my head was reeling. Sweat poured from my body as I stretched my leg out and pushed it up against his knife. My groin was beginning to feel like it did when I was a kid on the playground. I reached down, both legs spread far apart, teetering on the brink of losing my balance, and poured some whiskey into the open beer can and offered it to Sgt. McConnell. I must have looked pretty silly, my legs spread so far apart that the crack in my ass felt like it would tear open, offering a drink to a smiling misfit. *Smiling. He had to hurt almost as much as I did. What was he smiling for,* I thought?

That's when my lights went out. Gunner kicked out and caught me square in the nuts with his right foot. I woke up feeling angry and stupid. The searing pain between my legs made me feel like discretion was the better part of valor, and I wasn't all that sure that I may have a permanent disability. *The thought entered my mind that maybe, just maybe, I should thank Gunner,* but no, that thought left as quickly as it arrived. As my eyes slowly cleared I saw that deranged grin staring down at me. I wanted to cover my eyes but that would mean taking my hands away from my crotch and possibly exposing myself to more suffering. "Welcome to the team, Jerry. Care for another boilermaker?"

"No thanks Gunner," I said weakly," but if you've got a cold one how about pouring it down my pants."



FOURTEEN

She had a short black hair cut in a pixie style that touched her forehead just above her eyes. Like most young Vietnamese girls Ke Son Nu was straight as a string and weighed less than a hundred pounds dripping wet. In her tight Levi's and oversized sweatshirt the petit little sixteen-year-old high school junior could easily have been taken for a young boy in the dimly lit stairwell.

She had gone this way a thousand times, never thinking that there was any danger. She had worked as a seamstress, sewing silk sarongs for the An Lac Specialty Company since she was twelve years old, a trade taught to her by her mother, who managed to escape Vietnam in the withdrawal from Saigon in 1975. Her father wasn't so lucky. He was killed three days before the evacuation by an NVA shape charge. Ke Son Nu never got to know her father except for the few pictures her mother was able to save from the disorder that was Saigon just before it was overrun. Her mother grieved for many years and never considered remarrying. Ke Son was forced to go to work at an early age in order to help support her family, including the tribute that they paid each month to Uncle Vinh.

She had led a difficult life working long hours and trying to get an education. Ke Son hoped that one day she would be accepted at the university, that was her American dream. Like all dreams, some reach fruition, some don't. Ke Son entered the stairwell that night after work. She was excited about finishing her junior year in high school, she was excited about her dream of higher education

and the wealth that it would bring to her and her mother. That night her dream turned into a nightmare.

The voices began to drive him out of his dreamless sleep. They started very softly, awakening him gently with a soothing resonance characteristic of his mother's gentle voice. It was a joke the voices played on him before, feigning to be his mother while in reality, if the voices could be categorized, were the epitome of evil.

He rose carefully, not yet aware of the presence above him on the stairway. The steady tap.... tap.... tap of footsteps on the metal treads came slowly to his ears. The voices told him, *"IT'S TIME. THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU."*

His knuckles dug into the concrete until they bled as he leaned forward trying to hear the sounds more clearly. He reached into his coat pocket and removed a pair of tight leather gloves. He put them on as he looked up and saw only one light illuminating the stairwell. A plan of attack took shape in his mind. The bulb was within reach if he hurried before *"THEY"* came for him. He slid out from under the landing, quietly walking a half flight up the stairway, and unscrewed the bulb. His fingers burned even through the gloves but he never cried out as he quickly returned to the cover of the lower landing.

He hoped that in the darkness his *"TORMENTOR"* would leave, but the gentle tap.... tap.... tap on the stairs above him continued downward in his direction. He wedged his body as far back under the landing as he could. The cold, damp concrete felt like ice against his clothes. The voices told him to *forget the pain.....* *"DAU LUM,"* they said. "Pain is good." His friend, and tormentor, his inner voice, prepared him for what he must do to survive in this jungle of his mind.

When the light went out, Ke Son was more than halfway down the stairwell. Her heart jumped for a second as she stopped to let her eyes adjust to the absence

of light. This had not been the first time that she had to walk these stairs in the dark. She would tell her employer in the morning and hope that the bulb would be replaced by tomorrow night. She held the rail tightly and her hands began to perspire. The coolness of the round, steel handrail, felt good to her and served to reassure her, soundlessly, that nothing was wrong.

While the handrail told her one thing, her mind told her another. Why did the light go out so suddenly, it didn't even wink once or twice like old light bulbs often do? What was that squeaking sound that she subconsciously thought she heard just before the light went out? She remembered it being the kind of insignificant sound your mind might hear when listening to a subliminal tape. The kind of sound a light bulb makes when it is being removed. She stopped suddenly and listened harder. All she heard was the gasping of her own breath. *Nothing to worry about now, I've reached the last landing*, she thought. *Only a few more steps to the outside door.* Ke Son looked up and saw the dim outline of the light bulb. She was tempted to reach up and see if the bulb was unscrewed or really burned out. *Just a few more feet and you're out*, she thought. *Just tell the maintenance man in the morning.*

“Here let me help you.” The voice came out of nowhere as suddenly and frighteningly as a blast of sulfurous hot breath from the devil’s own mouth. She was held by the throat her feet just inches off the landing. Her heart felt like it would explode in her tiny chest. She began to sweat profusely, emitting a pungent odor that signaled a pheromone release, which was picked up immediately by the flaring nostrils of her attacker. He smelled the fear and he was excited!

Ke Son listened through closed eyes and choking breath as her attacker slowly screwed pulled her along as he screwed in the bulb. The high-pitched grating sound she thought she heard subconsciously had come back to haunt her.

Why didn't she leave when she had the chance? Suddenly Ke Son's feet felt the metal landing. The grip around her neck loosened and air rushed into her straining lungs.

As he let her down he came to the realization that she was a girl. He had never purposely done a girl before, but he couldn't let her go, after all, she had seen his face. He had relaxed his grip, but she wasn't going anywhere. His large body stood on the landing blocking her path to the door and she was too scared to try and run up the several flights of steep stairs that would take her back into the shop.

He reached into his coat and took out his knife, flashing it in front of her face. Ke Son began to whimper, her breath got short and she began to hyperventilate. She became oxygen starved and passed out at his feet. As she lay prone in front of him he marveled at her simple beauty but remembered that he had seen other men in the past fooled by simplistic beauty.

His thoughts went back in that instant to the floor of the Ia Drang Valley. He was on a search and destroy patrol, two days out of Plei Me. From the outpost overlooking the valley, he had spotted some pajama-clad indigenous children, led, front and back, by two young females. He sent a five-man patrol down to interject the trail in the direction of their march.

As the patrol left he picked the youngsters up with his field glasses. They were each carrying a small backpack. No weapons were visible. The two young girls that led the group couldn't have been more than fifteen. *They looked so young and fresh, the innocence of inviolate youth,* or so he thought. That's when he lost sight of the group. The trail twisted back into some thick foliage and swallowed them up in one swift gulp.

The next thing he heard was the sound of a firefight. Some small, but distinct, explosions, then deadly silence. His radio man tried to contact the patrol.

No luck, only static reached his ears from the PRC-25 radio. When they finally got another patrol out, he got the word he didn't want to hear. The five-man patrol apparently stopped the children but didn't take the proper security precautions. All five had been killed by a single shape charge that exploded from the backpack of one of the children. All their weapons and ammo had been taken, as well as the radio. The jungle had swallowed up the children and we didn't have the spirit left to follow them. He remembered throwing up at the sight of what was left of the patrol.

“You bitch. I won't be fooled again.” Ke Son noticed the momentary lapse in his concentration but was too terrified to move. She was still sniveling but managed to speak. “Please don't kill me. I've done nothing to harm you.” She was prostrate at his feet now and grasped his shoes.

He stepped gingerly back and kicked her in the face just under her right eye. She fell back against the stairs and grabbed her face. “It was you in the Ia Drang wasn't it?” he said!

“I don't know what you're talking about. Please don't hurt me anymore.” Her voice had turned from fear to pleading as the blood from her cut face dripped onto her white blouse.

Blood excited him. He took his knife and in a few short twists of his wrist, cut the buttons from her blouse. They fell through the porous grating like so many pebbles, finally coming to rest on the cold concrete floor. He tore what was left of her blouse down her back, pinning her arms tightly to her naked sides. “Please stop, I'll do anything you want, just don't kill me,” she sobbed.

“I know you'll do anything I want little lady,” he yelled as he pressed closer. His nostrils flared as he drew himself close to her face. He smelled the fear. She reeked of fear and his excitement was rising like a stiff dick at an office party. He

pushed his body against hers, thrusting his pelvis out, and grinding it against her thighs. He felt the warmth of his semen pulsing into his pants as he continued to thrust against her.

“Please don't kill me,” she begged again, knowing in her mind that her words would not reach the creature that was attacking her.

“Tell me, little lady, how long have you worked for the Viet Cong? How many of my comrades have you, and others like you, killed?”

At first, he heard only the wailing sobs of his victim, then, he heard the VOICES. “*She is the one that ambushed your patrol in the Ia Drang. It is time to exact out her punishment.....KILL HER NOW!*”

The knife flashed from his waistband as he swung her limp body around and in one swift movement, cut her with the precision of a surgeon, cut her from left ear to right. So quick was his blade that Ke Son didn't realize that her throat had been cut until she felt the warm fluid pouring down the front of her chest. She sobbed out but her cry was stifled, sputtering through her blood-gorged windpipe like hot pudding bubbling on the stove. *It was her turn to feel the mystery of the velvet curtain*, he thought, as he wielded his blade once more, severing the right ear from Ke Son's head.

Ke Son Nu heard the outer door close. It sounded far off like the distant roar of a drum pushed through a hollow pipe. She reached up and grasped her neck feeling the sticky mass oozing from the long gash. Then she realized that her fingertips were as cold as ice. *I'm dying*, she thought. Soon the frigid feeling moved up her arms and down her legs until her toes ached from the frosty sensation. It's funny the way your mind works when your life is flowing away in a river of blood. In her mind, she saw the end coming and all she thought about was how cold she was and how she should have listened to her mom that morning and worn some socks. Her unseeing eyes looked upward and saw the dark curtain

begin to descend. She struggled to push it back but she had no strength left. The coldness of her body had taken away her resolve. Her life juices poured through the metal grating and dripped onto the cement floor as the curtain came down on the final act of her life.



TWENTY

He had concluded his business in Cambodia with Phu Ho. He spent three days in the encampment of his boss's nephew. Three days of detailed planning regarding the next shipment of poppies that would be sent down the river. Three days of silently cursing Nam Phat and his Thai guerillas for the way they had treated him. Three days plotting the revenge he would exact from the aging leader.

Gunner was in his idea of heaven as he sat in the dark, noisy, smoke-filled Mu Tai Lounge. A scantily clad Thai bar girl clung to each of his arms. He flexed his right forearm and looked down at the tattoo he had etched there when he was a senior in high school. A devil with a pitchfork and the words "BORN TO BE BAD." Boy, how the high school chicks ate that up. He was one of the only guys in school with a tattoo. That tattoo was like a pussy magnet for the athletically built senior.

He concealed it for a while, wearing long sleeve shirts at home, then rolling up his sleeves when he got to school. One day he was working in the front yard of his parent's modest home. The sun was blazing hot and the air was as thick as a slice of his mom's homemade bread. He forgot about the tattoo and took off his

shirt. His mom noticed the offensive tattoo artist's handiwork as she stood at the kitchen window doing the morning dishes. At dinner that night, his dad asked him to roll up his sleeve, which he did. There was some heated debate. His mom told him she hated the tattoo and his dad told him to have it removed or he would burn it off. Gunner left home that week but not before putting his old man in the hospital with a broken arm. A necessity, after his dad, got his Benz-o-Matic torch out of the garage and began chasing him around the house, yelling, "born to burn in hell." Three weeks later he graduated from high school and joined the Army.

He was still lean and mean. That's what the guys on the A-Team use to call him. "The lean, mean, fighting machine." After his second tour in Nam, they replaced the word "fighting" with "killing." He wasn't sure exactly when the voices began to direct him, but they had kept him out of trouble and he liked that. With a hot bodied girl on each arm, he didn't need any voices to tell him what to do. The three of them left the smoke-filled Mu Tai Lounge and went upstairs to his air-conditioned suite for a little adult recreation. As they mounted the stairs Gunner let his right arm slide down the young Tai girl's ass, cradling her well-shaped buns. He looked down at his flexing forearm as he strode toward his room. "BORN TO BE BAD."

The case seemed to be cyclic in nature. A series of killings then nothing. To my mind, it was not a random killing it was serial in nature. I looked for patterns in all my cases. Patterns not only could tell you when the criminal would strike but, where, and even, if I was lucky, tell me who the criminal was. The FBI had a unit that specialized in helping local law enforcement agencies. They were known as the Criminal Investigative Analysis Unit. They worked out of an underground dungeon in Quantico Virginia. It was a think tank for criminal behavior. I had used them before and they'd proved beneficial in helping me see patterns that were right

in front of my face. Patterns that I should've recognized but couldn't see. I wanted to send them the information and photographs, but I needed Captain Davis' permission before getting other agencies involved.

I knew the Captain like the back of my hand. He would ask me the same questions he always did. "Can't we solve this without them, Jerry? It looks bad when we have to bring in other agencies to help us solve crimes."

I would stand with my head bowed slightly, and nod my ascension to each of his statements. "Yes sir, you're right Captain."

He would prod me again. "Have we gotten anything from the surveillance team or other street sources?"

I would shuffle my feet and look at the floor while I was talking to him. "No sir the surveillance team didn't turn up anything, so I canceled them to save money for the department. I have some street punks working on getting information, but they haven't turned up anything either."

"Good. Thank you for looking out for the department's budget. The chief will look favorably on me for that. God knows with my retirement just around the corner, I could use all the help I can get with the Chief."

Eventually, Captain Davis would cave in and let me carry on as I saw fit. It was a personality pattern that I didn't need help discovering and exploiting.

Vinh Ho was a happy man again. Happy in one respect but still concerned about the killings and the effect they were having on business. As he sat at the rear table in the Club Saigon, his face shrouded by the incessant presence of his large dark glasses, he thought of the telephone call he had just received from Bangkok. *He had been informed by an anonymous caller that his next drug shipment would take place within the month. He was a little discouraged to find out his old friend General Nam Phat was not cooperating like he usually did, but that was to be*

expected in a high-profile, high-profit business. The call was placed from a telephone booth and took less than two minutes to complete.

Chou Lai came into the club, looking dapper in his three-piece business suit. He took a seat at the back table across from Uncle Vinh. It was an image that Uncle Vinh made all his lieutenants adhere to. After all, he used to say, “they were businessmen, not thugs”.

“Chou. You look troubled my friend,” a sound of deep concern in the old man's voice.

“I have gotten the word out onto the streets and back alleys of our district, but I have not heard any news about the killings of Ke Son Nu or Johnny Hong.”

“I think our killer is a very clever man, Chou. Be patient. Word will come to us soon and when it does I will allow you to enact your vengeance. I will do this before I tell the police anything.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I have always counted on your generosity, just as you can count on my loyalty.” Chou reached across the table and took his uncle's wrinkled hand, reverently kissing his large red ruby ring.

For the past three weeks Gunner had knocked around Bangkok, nervously awaiting the call from Phu Ho that would tell him the transfer of the poppies had been completed. Days that he passed slowly, consuming large quantities of Thai beer, bullshitting with retired military and mercenary associates, and getting eye strain watching bar girls hump a brass pole on the stage at the Mu Thai.

He knew it was only a matter of days now until he heard from Phu Ho and he wanted to stay close to his room, but the boredom drove him farther into the inner city until at last, he stopped at the postal station to check his box. *His inner voice told him not to. It told him that he would be greeted with another postcard, a card he didn't want to see.* He should have listened, as he usually did, to his inner

voice. He didn't receive an envelope with the familiar handwriting. This time, he got a postcard with a picture of L.A.'s Little Saigon and smack dab in the middle of the card staring out at him in all her night time glory was the Club Saigon.

Whoever the son-of-a-bitch was that was doing this to him, had gone into the club and purchased the card. He remembered that Uncle Vinh sold them for fifteen cents each at the cash register near the front entrance to the restaurant. *How close is this guy to me*, he thought? He looked at the writing again. No doubt about it, it was the same as on the other cards and the last letter he received. He read the text. YOU KILLED PREACHER WITH YOUR DRUGS. YOU KILLED MEYERS WITH YOUR GUN. He signed it, "BORN TO BE BADDER."

Whoever the hell this guy was he knew about Mike Meyers. Gunner needed someone to fill his body bag. It had to be someone that was the same physical size as he was. The same hair color, skin, teeth. He had to kill him so there wouldn't be any dental work left or GRU would check them against his military dental records. Gunner was real clever.

Mike was downstairs in the commo bunker when Charley started his attack in '69. Gunner knew that the attack was imminent. They had intercepted communications from the 15th NVA bragging that they would be having Christmas dinner at the team house. As the first mortar rounds began to rain in on the camp, a much larger explosion occurred in the commo bunker. Gunner had taped a claymore mine to the outside of the commo bunker door, then called, from some distance for Mike. "New crypto codes Meyers." As he reached the door Gunner set off the claymore, which was mounted at head height. No dental records would be necessary because they were unattainable thanks to the six hundred steel ball bearings and the two pounds of C-4 that make up a standard claymore. Gunner ran into the bunker and dragged, what was left of the body, out into the compound.

He placed his death's head ring on the right hand of what, up until a few minutes ago, had been Mrs. Anne Meyers son.

Gunner cursed at himself. He thought he had been so careful. He wondered who it was on the team that saw him make the switch. Whoever it was lived in or near L.A. The postmark on the stamp was from a post office in Santa Monica. Santa Monica, he remembered, was where the VA Hospital was located. The same VA Hospital where Preacher died. That would be his starting point when he got back to L.A.

When he arrived back at the Mu Tai he went straight to his room. On the way up the bartender passed him a note. It was from Phu Ho. It simply said, "The shipment has arrived safely." Gunner smiled as he took the note over to an ashtray on the nightstand next to his bed. His eyes glowed in unison as he took the Zippo lighter out of his pocket and set the flame to the note. He held the note up to his face, watching each word disappear until the racing flame caught up with his fingers. He set it in the ashtray and continued to watch as the paper turned to a gray ash. Always cautious, he tamped the ash into a powder before taking it into his bathroom and flushing it down the toilet. *Now is my time, old man*, he thought. *I will exact my vengeance tomorrow.*

Gunner was happy as he returned to the bar. He went to the wall phone and dialed the number of his pilot. A fuzzy voice answered on the second ring. "Thai Bush Flight Service, Sandoval speaking." They had been doing business together for years. The arrangement that they had was when he was not flying for Vinh Ho he was free to do business with anyone he pleased just as long as that business did not conflict with Uncle Vinh's.

Enrique Sandoval knew what business that was and stayed clear of any conflicts. He knew that he was to put the business of the Colonel ahead of anything

else he had going. After all, it was the Colonel that supplied him with a new aircraft every other year. Enrique Sandoval knew where to place his loyalty and his priorities. His air service now consisted of the Piper Navajo, a UH-1D helicopter, and a DE Havilland Twin Otter. For a guy that was still listed as MIA, Enrique Sandoval was doing better than most of the ex-GIs. Most of them, he'd read, whenever he could get his hands on an American newspaper, that had made it home, were characterized as a sorry lot; and as the American economy got worse over the years, it was the Vietnam vets that seemed to be without jobs, strung out on booze and drugs or were committing suicide at an exponential rate.

Enrique, like the people he worked for, didn't have any conscience about being a participant in feeding the physical misery of his former compatriots. What the fuck had they ever done for him anyway. The chopper he was flying was shot down over the Ashau Valley, near the border with North Vietnam. The American forces never sent out a search party to search for him. All the "maydays" that he shouted over his radio transmitter seemed to fall on deaf ears. He activated an emergency locator beacon, but nobody came. He felt deserted. For two days he was stuck in his ship with the bodies of his co-pilot and door gunner. The stench was terrible. He was injured, still strapped into the cockpit when the VC captured him. That was during Tet in 1972. He was a late entry into the war, serving only three months before his capture.

In 1973, he was secretly released after extended negotiations between the VC and an ARVN Colonel by the name of Vinh Ho. Colonel Ho had arranged to have him clandestinely delivered to Bangkok. The Americans were never to know, and he would continue to be listed as MIA. Enrique didn't know it at the time, but he'd just earned his parade.

By the time Enrique went to Thailand he hated the US and all she stood for, this in part, as a result of continuous brainwashing while in the hands of the VC.

He agreed to never speak to any of his remaining family again. No need for that, he was convinced they all abandoned him along with his government. Colonel Ho set him up with his own air transport service on the outskirts of Bangkok. Six months later the Colonel introduced Sandoval to Gunner McConnell and he began doing business in the drug trade. Enrique was one of the 58,000 that got a parade. His name was enshrined on the Vietnam Memorial, "The Wall" in Washington, D.C.

"Enrique my man. Tomorrow we fly back into the jungle, so cancel whatever you've got planned and prepare a flight plan for Kosum Phisai. It's a little east of the last drop we made in that area."

It was so like Gunner to not ask what he had scheduled, but that was the arrangement he had with Colonel Ho, and he wasn't about to not honor his commitment at the risk of losing everything. "My pleasure Mr. McConnell. Is there any preferred mode of travel you'd like to take?"

"Thought you'd never ask Enrique. Let's take the chopper for old times' sake. I'm meeting the General and we won't be stopping for long. Just in, make a drop, then out again."

"What about an LZ?"

"I've got a map for you that has the LZ marked out. Should be easy for an ace like you to find. Oh yeah, keep the rotors going while we're on the ground. I won't be long."

Gunner was such a motherfucker, he thought. Never misses a chance to dig at him because he'd been shot down. At least, that's the way Enrique interpreted the remark. "Sounds good to me my friend. What time do you want to leave?"

"I'll be at your place at seven a.m. Set your flight plan as follows; first, we fly to Khon Kaen, there's an airport there where we refuel. I want full tanks when

we head back to Bangkok. After that, we make our meeting at Kosum Phisai and then head for home. I don't expect to be on the ground more than thirty seconds.”

“No problem Mr. McConnell. See you at seven.” In all the years that he'd been doing this for the Colonel and his local boss, Gunner McConnell, he'd never stayed on a landing strip for only thirty seconds. A red flag went up in Enrique Sandoval's head, and the writing on the flag told him to be ready for anything tomorrow.

Gunner slept well that night in anticipation of the payback he intended to put on Nam Phat. He would take the old man out with extreme prejudice.

My head was splitting again. All the details, in this case, were stressing me out so bad that I thought I'd pass out from this latest migraine. The room was beginning to spin, and I hadn't even drunk my first scotch of the day. Maybe that was the problem. I needed an infusion of booze to get back on an even keel. I sat down, afraid that someone would notice my unsteady behavior, and report me to the Captain. Two things could happen if that occurred. One; I'd get my vacation approved. Or two, and this was more likely; I'd be removed from the case. Not wishing to take a chance on the later happening, I opted to take three aspirin, regain my composure, and head for the 44 Magnum.

It was still early when I arrived at my favorite watering hole. My mind was at ease as far as my job went, having put into motion the forces of Interpol, the FBI, and the CIA before I left the office. I was sure my desk would be cluttered with informational reports when I got there the next morning. Mondo looked surprised to see me. “You look like you could use this, Jerry. This one's on me,” he said. As if he was reading my mind, he slammed a rocks glass with a double shot of Johnny Walker Red in front of me. “You know Jerry you're looking as bad as

you did a few weeks ago when you were on your surveillance. In fact, no offense but, you look like shit man.”

“No offense taken amigo, and thanks for the drink. Say isn't it time for your lesson?”

“What lesson, Jerry?”

“Your swimming lesson for the next time you have to swim the Rio Grande.”

“Very funny, Jerry. You got me good on that one. If I need a swimming lesson than you need a floating lesson.”

“How is that, Armando?”

“Cause shit floats man and you still look like shit.”

How many times had Mondo and I gone through this scenario? I knew I'd better change the subject before he did me in with his caustic brand of south of the border humor. In the humor department, I was no match for the bartender, and he knew it. “Have you seen Willy Beal in the past few days, Mondo?”

“I saw him briefly two days ago, but he only stopped in to ask if you were here, then, poof, gone like a puff of smoke at an Indian Pow Wow. If he comes in again do you want me to give him a message for you?”

I wondered what Willy was up to. It had been several days since I last talked to him. There had been no more murders since the death of Ke Son Nu. While I hated to think about it, Willy B didn't have an alibi for the night of the murder. “No Mondo. Just let him know I'd like to talk with him.” I handed Mondo a quarter.

“Thanks Jerry for the generous tip. Is there some other service I can perform for you?”

I knew I could lay a heavy trip on him after what he said, but I thought better of saying anything else, knowing it would unleash his rapier-like wit. “Yeah. If

you see Willy, give him the quarter and, tell him to call me. He has the number,” I said, tongue in cheek “that is if he can remember it.”

“If he can't Jerry I'll write the number of the station house down for him. Write it in ink on his forearm or someplace he won't lose it.”

“Thanks, Mondo. Now please pour us another one. The back of my throat's as dry as my ex-wife's vagina.” I couldn't believe I said that. I knew it was really time for a vacation.

Chou Lai had gone from shop to shop in the Little Saigon Business District asking questions that could lead him to the identity of the murderer. He had been at it for a couple of weeks before he happened into the Delta Hotel. He approached the desk man, who sat in his tall chair sleeping on one elbow. “Sorry to wake you Tran, but I have a few questions to ask.”

Tran Van Quai woke suddenly, snapping to a semblance of attention behind his chair. “You are speaking to me, Chou Lai?”

“Yes, I speak to you, Tran. A couple of weeks ago you hear that a girl named Ke Son Nu was killed on her way home from work?”

“Yes. I hear that. But I never see Miss Nu. I don't know her. She never comes into this neighborhood.”

“I know that but you may have seen the killer and not known it. I would be most appreciative if you had any information that would lead me to the killer.”

“How appreciative Chou,” his greedy side coming to the top like soured cream on coffee.

“I'm sure we could work out a mutually agreed cash settlement. In fact, I would also tell Uncle Ho about your willingness to cooperate. He would also, I'm sure, give you a fitting reward.”

Tran smiled displaying a huge gold-capped front tooth with a red heart in the center. “Maybe I do see something suspicious about two weeks ago. An American stayed here. He insisted that I let him use room 502. Room 502 is high up and overlooks the same street that the Club Saigon is on. I think maybe he spies on the club. He looked like shit and smelled like the inside of a bottle of cheap wine. Oh yes, he carried a little bag. He took the bag with him when he left each morning.”

“How tall was he Tran? What color was his hair? Any distinguishing marks or jewelry?”

“I try harder to remember details, Chou. You think Uncle Ho will be very generous with me?”

“I think so. You have given me more information than I received all week. Now, what about a physical description of this American?”

“He is about six feet tall. I remember because when he first came here to get his room I had to look up to talk with him. His hair was brown, I think. His eyes also brown. I don't remember any other features unless bad breath is a physical feature. Oh yes,” He added as an afterthought. “He had a large silver ring on his right hand.”

“Thank you, Tran. I'm sure Uncle Ho will be very generous to you for the information. If you should see anything else or hear anything on the street, please contact me.” Chou reached into his pocket and pulled out a fist full of hundred-dollar bills. He peeled off two of them and stuffed the bills into Tran's shirt pocket.

“You are most generous Mr. Chou. I will keep my ears to the pavement and try to get more information on the American, or anyone else that seems suspicious, or might know something about that night.”

Captain Davis was waiting for me when I got to the office the next morning. The look on his chubby face told me that today might be a good time to check with

him about an extended vacation. One thing about being a cop for so long, I had become an expert at reading facial expressions, especially on the face of my short time captain. He sat on the edge of my desk reading papers that were on top, and alternately looking up at my Little Saigon scoreboard. “More information from the feds came in for you last night, Jerry. You ought to have a look at it right away. Your desk gets more action than a whore house.”

“I will Cap as soon as I get some coffee and a fat pill from the donut box.” I ambled over to the coffee urn and filled my cup, grabbing an apple fritter from the box of donuts that was donated daily by the Dunkin Donut Shop.

“Those things will kill you, Jerry if you eat too many of them,” he said, looking down at my growing table muscles.

He was right. I really needed to work out more and get back into shape. A trip to the far east would sweat that off me in a couple of days. Another reason to hit him up for a vacation. My poor health aside I queried the captain. “Yeah, Captain I was meaning to talk to you about that. As you know,” I was sure he had no idea, “I haven't had a vacation in the past few years. Since the killings have stopped I'd like to take some time off.” I paused briefly before continuing, hoping to get a read on Captain Davis' face. He looked amenable. “Not only for the health reasons that you just mentioned, but I had an idea that I could mix business with pleasure.” I stopped again. He looked like he might buy into my idea. “You see this suspect here?” I pointed to a picture of Gunner that was on the board. Without waiting for his recognition, I went on, “Gunner McConnell, AKA Ray McCormack, AKA Mac Millan. I know this guy personally from the war. My idea was to go to Thailand for my vacation and look into his activities and either eliminate or confirm him as a suspect in the case.”

The captain came off the end of the desk. “You want me to approve your vacation ... to Thailand?”

“Yes, Bangkok Thailand.”

“Sounds exciting. Who’s going to work the case while you’re gone?”

“I figure you can assign Fleming. He's not doing much now and he's familiar with the case. If my guess is right not much will happen during the month I'm gone anyway.”

“Month....You want me to give you a month off? Give me a break Jerry! How can I justify to the brass a months’ vacation for my top investigator on the Little Saigon Slasher case?”

“Easy Cap. Like I said, after I arrive I’ll check in with the local authorities and hand them a letter of introduction from you. It will be a working vacation. I also expect to have some discussions with the Asian office of Interpol while I'm there. It should be easy to sell to the top brass, especially if I can come up with anything new on our suspect.”

“O.K. Jerry I'm sold. When do you want to start your vacation? “

“Immediately. As soon as you write me the letters of introduction to the local authorities I'll be ready to go. My passport is in order. I can use my Christmas club account to fund my trip. All I need to do is go down to an Army-Navy Surplus Store and pick up the appropriate threads.”

“Sounds like you're really organized. Take the rest of the day to get your shit together and I'll have the approval and the letters on your desk first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, captain. You won't regret this decision.”

“I’d better not or you won't get an invite to my retirement party.”

TWENTY-FOUR

It was nine-thirty when Gunner and Rosy arrived at the Club Bangkok. The club was busy when George buzzed them in. A Thai rock band played 60's rock and roll while their lead singer, to the delight of the raucous crowd, did bad Elvis Presley impersonations. "Busy night tonight George. How much business have we done so far this evening?"

George went back to the cash register and quickly reviewed his receipts. "Looks like about eight hundred Mr. McConnell. Not bad for early on a Saturday night."

Gunner looked around surveying the crowd. "George, have the band turn up the sound level for the next set."

"Yes sir Mr. McConnell," he said as he walked out from behind the bar and walked to the bandstand and engaged the lead guitarist's ear.

Gunner looked over at Rosy. She was wearing a tight leather mini skirt that accentuated her heavy thighs and large buttocks. The skirt couldn't have been covering her beaver by more than an inch and a half. Modesty wasn't one of Rosy's characteristics. Gunner liked having her around because she didn't ask questions and when he needed it, she was his sex machine. But, that was before he followed her last week. That was before he discovered that his girl Rosy had another flat in a

high-class section of downtown Bangkok. That was before she saw the thin Chinese-American man slide an envelope under her door.

George came back to the bar. “May I get you folks a drink,” he asked as he wiped down the bar top.

“You sure can George. I'll have a Wild Turkey 101, neat. Make that two fingers neat. You can get Rosy her usual. Rum and coke with a paper umbrella.”

She squeezed Gunner knee, rubbing herself up against him. The drinks came just as the band came back from a short break between sets. The lead singer began to sing his rendition of Rock Around the Clock. Rosy noticed that they were louder than before but other than that paid no attention to the group. Gunner put his arm around her hourglass waist and leaned toward her ear. “What say we go to the back office? I've got some business to take care of.”

Rosy thought she knew the kind of business he was talking about. “Business first, pleasure later or pleasure first,” she asked with a wink in her eye?

“A little of both Rosy,” he said as he felt her hand run up and down his leg.

They got up together and walked to the back of the club. “George,” said Gunner as he passed the end of the bar, “I've got some business to take care of. I don't want to be disturbed.”

“Right you are Mr. McConnell. I've got things under control out here.”

Rosy led the way to the back office. All the while Gunner's intense eyes were glued to her tight, titillating ass. *I'm was going to miss her*, he thought, as mental images of their past savage lovemaking came into the window of his mind. Gunner reached into his pocket and pulled out a brass key as he reached across her sexy body, and opened the door.

The door snapped open, then silently swung inward on smooth, well-worn hinges. Rosy went straight to the long couch and stretched her body out, purposely baring her thighs as she looked seductively at Gunner.

Gunner stood momentarily in the doorway, his silhouette backlit by the red and purple lights radiating from the light track over the dancefloor. He stepped inside and as he closed the door behind him and in a heartbeat, the boisterous sounds from the club went away.

He stood for a moment, unspeaking, just staring at Rosy's prone figure as she took her place on the leather couch that dominated the office. She was still sipping on her rum and coke when he walked up to her and slapped her in the face. The paper umbrella disintegrated along with her drinking straw and several teeth. Her cheek turned white from the blow. Blood began to flow out of her mouth and nose, running in a thin red trickle onto the floor where she now lay.

Rosy looked up into the face of Gunner McConnell. Tears flowed into her eyes then ran over the lower lids of her eyes like an overflowing water bucket and mixed with the blood on her face. She cowered down expecting another blow. Afraid to do or say anything, she just looked up at the frenzied man standing over her. As she made eye contact with Gunner she knew immediately by his maniacal stare that he had found out about her other apartment. Instinctively she knew that he knew. She silently prayed that the cavalry led by Frank Liu would burst through the outer door and save her; but, she also knew that it wasn't likely.

Gunner reached down, almost gently, and grabbed the front of Rosy's blouse. He lifted her body effortlessly back onto the couch, his eyes never leaving hers. Fear, that's what he saw in her eyes, and he liked that. Once fear entered a person they were easier to deal with. In all likelihood, he would get the truth out of her before this night was out, hell, before the next ten minutes were out. "Who're you seeing Rosy? Who's the other guy?"

Her mind soared into action. Perhaps this wasn't about Frank Liu. Maybe, just maybe, Gunner thinks I'm fucking another guy. "I thought you no mind me seeing someone else when you are away G.I. I mean no harm. I just lonely sometimes." She tried to look at him straight in the eye, without averting her own eyes, but it was impossible.

Once fear took over it makes liars out of all of us. Gunner knew, from his years in Nam interrogating prisoners, a person who is afraid will say anything, or do anything, to get themselves off the hook. He liked playing the game. He was skilled at the game. He would let them tell tall tales and he got depraved pleasure from the extent a terrified mind will go when fear is the driving force. He knew how to read the signs. The way a person sweats and eyes that can't maintain contact... Nervous twitching in the cheeks or hands and the subtle Pulling at clothing. He could always tell, and, he enjoyed playing out the victims. "Tell me, Rosy? It won't do you any good to be silent. I'll find out in the end anyway. Who's the guy Rosy?"

Rosy had been on the streets for years and considered herself streetwise. Being street smart is an acquired talent. It takes years of practice to be good at it. She realized the predicament she now found herself in and had to choose the lesser of two evils. From the way she saw it, there was no choice. It's easy to choose between death and a beating; so, she lied. "I find me a new man for the times you are away. He likes to fuck me, and he takes care of me. He Thai like me. I figure that maybe he wants to marry me. Maybe I have babies with him. It nice to be part of a family. I'm sorry Mac San. I no want to hurt you. I didn't know you care for me so much."

Gunner felt his anger rise. He hated it when people lied to him. It made him think that they questioned his intelligence. He sent his closed fist crashing into her

solar plexus. She gasped, as her breath sucked out of her diaphragm like one of her hasty blowjobs. She could not speak. Too bad, he wanted to hear another lie. Her brown eyes grew big and her cheeks puffed up from the punch. Her eyes closed and she passed out from the pain and lack of oxygen.

There is a netherworld of time that seems, to the victim, to be endless, but to the interrogator is but a few short seconds. For the victim, the time of unconsciousness seems endless. A painless dream. Blackness without fear. But, upon reawakening, the reality of the inquisition brings the victims situation back into clear focus. The pain returns along with the fear. The inquisitor is in her face ready to ask the next question. A simple choice. Lies or the truth. Lies equal pain or truth equals death. At some point, the pain will be worse than death. At some point, the truth will have to be told and death would surely follow. Rosy was streetwise. She knew that there was always a chance that Gunner would eventually tire of punishing her. For now, she would continue to lie. "Please, Mac San, I no go see him again. Please don't hit me anymore. Please, I fuck only you from now on."

The fear was back from the edge of unconsciousness. He continued to play on her fear. "Give me the name of the guy, bitch, or so help me I'll kill you an inch at a time."

She knew his name but little else about him. He was a voice on the telephone, an envelope full of cash under her door. She never saw him. She couldn't describe him. She didn't even know who or what he did for a livelihood. Sure, she suspected he was a cop of some kind, but didn't know for sure. "His name Frank," opting for the truth as she cowered, shaking, on the floor.

"Frank. Frank who bitch. What's his last name?"

She didn't know. All she knew is he paid off like a Bangkok slot machine. She tried the truth, hoping she would not be punished any further. "Frank. He never tells me his last name."

“You expect me to believe that, and you're fucking this guy regularly? You're thinking of having kids with him and settling down to the straight life, and you don't know his last name? You insult my intelligence again, Rosy.” The back of his hand slashed across her face. His death head ring left a furrow of blood and tissue where her blemish free cheek used to be.

Rosy put her hand to her cheek feeling the warm oozing blood that was coursing down her face. *She remembered how her mom, who was a nurse, once told her that the hands and face have a greater number of capillaries than other parts of the body and bleed more.* Why was she thinking about something her mother once told her? She had no idea why that thought popped into her bleeding head. Even as she bled *the thought of her nurturing, kindly, mother calmed her and pushed the thought of what might come next, out of her head.* The fear psyche had left Rosy, at least for the moment, and she was content to just lay half on the couch, and half on the floor, and bleed. She looked up and saw three Gunner's looking down at her. She focused on the one in the middle. Her ears were ringing like a firehouse bell and she felt like throwing up. It was still not yet time for the truth. There was still a possibility that he would tire of this beating and leave her alone to nurse her wounds. “I no mean to hurt you G.I. I love you. I sorry I just try to make you jealous so you marry me.” She felt the fear return with her words. Before the next punch, her mind told her that her deception wasn't working.

The blood had momentarily stopped and was coagulating on her pitiable looking, once beautiful, face. Gunner saw the fear again but tired of the dull story she was telling. *Why couldn't she be more innovative in her storytelling,* he thought as he reached into his pocket and removed his switchblade knife.

At the sight of the knife, Rosy's fear turned to terror. As the knife snapped open she wanted to scream but nothing came out of her mouth but a whimper. She got down on her knees and clung tightly to Gunners' legs. “Please,” she begged.

She had reached the moment of truth. “Please don't kill me I will tell you what you want to know.”

Gunner pulled Rosy's hair, jerking her to her feet. He looked down into her moon-shaped face, which was badly bruised, severely cut, and covered with dry blood mixed with her tears.” Enough of your bullshit, Rosy. Who's the guy you're seeing when I'm not in town?”

She almost choked on her words. “His name is Frank, really that's all I know.” She knew her next words would sign her death warrant, but the beating had taken away her will to live. “I think he is some kind of cop. Not local. He pays me good money to tell him when you're not in Bangkok. That's all. He pays me enough money, so I do not have to work the streets when you are not in Bangkok. I'm able to save myself for you that way.” *She thought those last words might save her but with her re-arranged face, and broken body, she'd be lucky if she could get a job cleaning toilets.*

As Gunner looked down at the quivering girl he felt some small measure of empathy for her plight. He knew she had come face to face with the truth and in telling the truth felt relief. In her mind she was doing nothing wrong, in fact, she was demonstrating love and devotion to him. Nobody had ever done that before, not even his own mother. Rosy had stopped sobbing now, perhaps realizing what came next. Gunner knew from past experience that she was ready to accept her fate. She had told the truth and relieved her soul. She had accepted that she could do no more to change the course of events. Her destiny was in the hands of Gunner McConnell and she had prostrated herself before his justice.

Justice comes swiftly in the psychopathic world of Gunner McConnell. *His inner voice was unmerciful. It shouted out for him to kill her. It reminded him that she had gone to the cops.* His head began to pound with the resounding sounds of

his inner voice. Gunner jerked Rosy's head up, pulling hard on her hair until she faced him. He kissed her hard on the lips and felt the blood and tears roll off her face and into his mouth. He savored the taste and it turned him on. For the briefest moment, Rosy felt relieved as Gunners' lips touched hers. *She had told him the truth and he would not harm her further*, she prayerfully thought.

Her body went limp in his arms. But his inner voice would not let it rest. Gunner reached out with his free hand and with the expertise of the trained killer that he was, drew the switchblade across her throat. The look of surprise crossed Rosy's face as her lifeblood pumped onto the carpet. He held her away from himself for another minute until he was sure she would bleed to death, then threw her onto the floor. Her eyes glazed over then closed for the last time. The velvet curtain signaled the end of Rosy's performance.



The political gerrymandering of the twenty-sixth district, Little Saigon, had occurred in large part due to the generous contributions of Colonel Vinh Ho to the local democratic party. Little Saigon had now been set aside as a congressional district. It had been done in spite of a huge outcry from the marginal number of white middle-class voters still left in the district. They were now the minority, and the writing was on the wall.

The day the new congressional district was proclaimed was the day that Vinh Ho registered as a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives. Signs and banners began to appear all over Little Saigon. The November election was only six months away and only token opposition had declared their intention to run. The

Republican candidate would likely get few votes in the district and monetary support for a sure loser was negligible. Vinh Ho knew that it was money that won elections, and he had all the money.

Willy Beal had seen the campaign posters going up all over the district. Seeing the smiling face of the former ARVN officer looking out from every lamppost and billboard made him want to puke. It was coming full circle. First, it was the politicians that flushed Willy, and the rest of America's finest, down the toilet in Vietnam. Now, it was the Vietnamese that were becoming the politicians. The next logical step, in his mind, was the White House.

It was on that day, the day he first saw the political posters, that Willy first became aware of the political aspirations of Vinh Ho. It was on that day that he began to formulate a plan to eliminate him off the planet. It would not be easy getting close to him. His henchmen were still looking real hard for Willy, but, he would find a way. No matter what happened he had to stop this power-hungry VC from becoming a political force. In the minds of many people that had seen him recently, he may have been a homeless bum, but Willy Beal could become the man that he once was, a Special Forces gladiator; and if all else failed, he could always become invisible.

So, it was that Willy Beal took up residence in a narrow alley directly across the street from the Club Saigon. He built himself a shelter out of cardboard boxes and began to spend the daylight hours watching the front of the restaurant and taking copious notes. After a week, he knew everyone that regularly went into the club. He could identify all of Vinh Ho's soldiers. He could differentiate gang members from patrons. He knew what kind of cars they drove. He knew when Vinh Ho arrived in the morning and left at night. He knew all the consorts of his gang members. He knew the hookers that regularly worked the club.

Willy, after a short self-imposed detox, could not have been so meticulous except by stopping his drinking. He knew he had to do it to complete his mission. Sure, he continued to act like a rummy when he came out at night, but it was all an act. A charade made up for the locals. He made himself almost invisible just by maintaining his cover. He only came out of his shelter at night and only for short periods of time. Willy was a hunter now, and his prey was the man on the poster. The poster was constantly on his mind. It was in front of his waking eyes and behind his sleeping lids. Willy Beal, was once again, a highly trained soldier on a mission.

The man known as Jack Dorn sat in a booth at the back of the Club Bangkok. It was dark except for the candle in the center of the table. He had brought Yin and Yang with him as part of his cover. They flanked him and were happily enjoying the loud band as they sipped their paper umbrella kool aids. Jack continued to look around the club, his eyes searching for his former teammate.

Jack had been in the club for over an hour when he noticed the office door in the far corner of the club open. A large man came out but it wasn't light enough to make out any details. The man stopped at the bar and whispered something to George, who nodded his head in agreement. The big guy found an empty booth near the dance floor. He remembered that Gunner had been a big guy. He had the muscular lean physique of a bodybuilder. The guy Jack saw come out of the office was the right height, but he was considerably larger in girth than he remembered Gunner being. Still, it was possible. Jack looked down at his own body and noticed that he was significantly larger in girth than he was twenty-two years ago.

Jack got up from the table and told the girls to sit tight. They misunderstood him and as soon as he got up they squeezed next to each other and began to hug. Jack just shook his head and moved to a seat at the bar. George came over and

asked what he wanted to drink. “How about some Chevas, George, and some information.”

“Chevas, I know we have Mr. Dorn. The information part of your order, I'm not sure of.” George poured a generous two fingers of scotch with no ice into a rocks glass and pushed it and the bar tab in his direction.

Jack signed the bar tab and slid it back to him. “Say, George, I'm looking forward to meeting the club manager. When's the best time to be here for a meet and greet?”

“Most every night after nine, sir. He's here now but doesn't wish to be disturbed.” Jack left a five spot on the bar and went back to his booth.

On the way back to his table he noticed Frank Liu sitting at the far end of the bar. He was drinking beer from a large pitcher, and wearing a felt hat pulled down over his eyes. He was obviously trying to look inconspicuous, so Jack pretended not to notice him. It was difficult, and he had to stifle a laugh because Frank looked like the winner of the Indiana Jones Look-a-like Contest. If this bar had been in L.A. Frank Liu would have been inundated by teenage groupies trying to get a Harrison Ford autograph. Jack was half tempted to send Yin and Yang over to him with a bar napkin and a pen, but knowing them, they'd probably believe he was a big American movie star. At that point, Jack was sure they'd forget about the autograph and just give him a hasty blowjob instead. Since Jack didn't want to upset Frank's cover he decided to just sit awhile and hope to reacquaint himself from afar with his old teammate. *I wonder what Franks cover story is and how he managed to successfully infiltrate this group,* he thought.

George went over to the large guy at the table near the dance floor and whispered something in his ear. The big guy looked Jack's way and nodded his head. Jack's intuitive inner voice told him *it was now or never. “Take the bull by the horns and introduce yourself,”* it said to him. *If he recognizes me, play on the*

good old days and tell him Dorn is my alias. If he doesn't, I just play Jack Dorn, the international gun runner. If things got bad, I was sure that Frank Liu would jump in and help out. I nodded back in his direction and without saying anything to the girls got up and went over to Gunners' table.

"My name's Jack Dorn. I trade in international arms," I said as I extended my right hand as an invitation to shake hands and placed a business card in front of him with my left. He shook my hand. There was no initial sign of recognition in his eyes or mannerisms. "I'm Mac McConnell. I manage this club. George said you wanted to meet me. It was dark in the club, but I could feel his eyes prying through the darkness like a coastal lighthouse on a foggy night. Haven't I seen you somewhere before," he said as he made, and held, eye contact?

Two Thai boys that looked to be about eighteen years old approached the table. Gunner got up just before they got there and met them, whispering into one's ear. They both nodded their heads and went back to the office behind the bar. Gunner sat back down, and we made small talk. I told him I was looking for connections to the arms market and the gorilla twins told me that he might be interested in doing some business. George brought us another drink. I noticed that the two Thai boys came out of the office carrying a roll of carpet. They went out the side door as inconspicuously as possible. Gunner noticed me watching them. "I stained the carpet in my office. The boys will take care of the mess tonight and have my rug cleaned and back before the start of business tomorrow."

"Sorry to hear that Mac," I said. I looked over at the end of the bar and noticed that Frank was gone. *He probably went to the can,* I thought. I first noticed he was gone right after the Thai boys left by the side door. After so many years of police work, your intuition becomes your best ally. My intuition told me to come clean with Gunner. Let him know who I was before he found out for himself. Have a reunion of sorts. Celebrate the good old days in Nam. Tilt a few to the living and

a few more to the dead. With his backup now gone from the premises, Jacks' intuition told him to confront Gunner McConnell. As they say on that T.V. game show, "Jerry Andrews, AKA Jack Dorn, come on down."

Frank followed the two Thai boys out the back door, being careful to follow at a respectful distance. The roll of carpet leaving in the middle of a busy night at the club was too suspicious for him to pass it up. The Thai boys pitched the roll of carpet into the back of an old run-down ford pickup truck they had parked in the alley. Frank watched them turn left out of the alley and followed on foot for one short block before jumping into his car. He continued to shadow them as they turned away from the crowded downtown area and headed out into an area known as the marsh.

He wasn't sure what had made him follow the Thai boys, he just had a gut instinct that they were another piece to the Gunner McConnell puzzle. Instinct is like adrenalin to a good cop. It is the difference between good cops, and bad cops, live cops, and dead cops. The Thai boys began to slow as they crossed the Sun Tao Bridge. Frank saw them slow. He turned off his headlights and pulled to the side of the road. He reached into his glove box and removed a pair of night vision I.R. binoculars.

The Thai boys waited, pretending to be taking a piss while two cars passed in the opposite direction. Then they went to the back of the truck and took out the carpet roll. They shouldered it, straining under the weight. It was at that moment that the light went on inside Frank Liu's head. An eight by ten area rug couldn't possibly weigh more than forty pounds. He watched as the two Thai boys struggled with their burden. With great difficulty, they hefted it over the side of the bridge. Frank watched and listened. It took three seconds from the time the carpet roll went over the side until he heard the splash. He figured in his head. Vertical drop,

at least sixty feet. The light inside his head went off again as he watched the Thai boys drive quickly over the bridge and out of sight. The splash, it was so pronounced. An eight by ten area rug doesn't sound like the great white whale slapping the shit out of Captain Ahab, it has a gentle, subdued splash... this splash sounded like Chubby Checkers doing a cannonball into a swimming pool.

Frank put down his field glasses and fired up his car engine. He drove quickly to the spot where the carpet roll had been dumped. He got out of his car and looked over the side of the bridge. The water was shallow with a slow current that hugged the watergrass. The moon lit up the surface like a black mirror reflecting a beam of light and allowed Frank to have good night vision, even without his binoculars. The carpet had landed on its edge and had begun to unroll. As it fell flat, unwound, and began to drift slowly along the bank, he saw the body.

Frank Liu was panic stricken. He ran to the end of the bridge in an attempt to race the current. He tumbled down the embankment coming to rest at the water's edge, just as the carpet began to sink from view. He saw a hand just above the water's surface. He plunged into the tepid water and found an arm which he tugged on until he had her on shore. He knew before he saw her that it was Rosy. Somewhere they'd made a mistake and it cost her life. He blamed himself, but he knew the risks involved in a cop informant relationship and so did she. Rosy was well paid to take those risks and she assumed them gratefully. Never the less it saddened Frank to find her like this. It saddened him and bolstered his hatred for Gunner McConnell. Frank knew, it was McConnell who killed her. He also knew that Gunner probably enjoyed it. He wanted to kill the bastard now but that would have to wait. Frank took one last look at Miss Rosy then pulled her back out into the mainstream, and watched as her body slowly slipped under the dark water.



TWENTY-SEVEN

Willy waited until just before dawn to let himself out of the closet. Before he left, he stashed his flashlight, and the mallet he'd stolen from the kitchen, into a cardboard box. He pushed the box into the back corner of the closet and covered it with a rag.

He was amazed at how good his senses were working since he'd stopped drinking. He peered around the darkened kitchen knowing he would test his ability to enter and record all the details many times before he actually would conclude his mission. He was born with intuition and it served him well throughout his life. He learned the art of observation in Advanced Infantry Training and Ranger School at Fort Bragg. His years in the jungle had taught him patience. His years on the streets had taught him awareness. Now that Willy Beal was sober he was an awesome opponent.

He opened the kitchen door from the inside and entered the alley. He stepped gingerly over the spot where Johnny Hong had been brutally murdered. He slid through the shadows of Bakers Alley like a bamboo viper, and, after checking to make sure he wasn't being followed, glided undetected onto Main Street. A warm Santa Ana wind whipped around him filling the air and the sidewalk with yesterday's newspapers. Willy grabbed a piece of the Herald and read the front page. The election for the house seat in the newly formed twenty-sixth district was

three days off. The Herald predicted that Mr. Vinh Ho would win in a landslide, mainly due to the ethnic character of his district. Willy crumpled the paper and tossed it into the dry gutter. The drought had lasted five years in L.A. and it looked like no end was in sight. He couldn't do much about the lack of rain, but he damned well could do something about the election.

Chou Lai had also been observing the streets over past few days. Not so much with his own eyes and ears, but through his network of paid informants. It was just one of those informants that told him about the cardboard castle in the alley across from Club Saigon. He had gone there last night just before dawn figuring to surprise Willy while he was asleep.

He shredded the cardboard with a machete he had borrowed from one of his enforcers. Chou slashed the cardboard to ribbons waiting for the inevitable swing that would contact a solid object... the sleeping form of Willy Beal. No such contact ever took place. His mind took over his reason as he swung again and again at the rough brown paper. *The son-of-a-bitch is invisible just like the last time we met. He's not a demon. He's just a man. A bum*, he thought.

Tears streamed down his impassioned face as he thought of the lifeless body of Ke Son Nu. He searched for other clues to help him locate this phantom. He looked for food wrappers that might tell him where this ghost of the alleys shopped, but he found none. He found nothing except shredded cardboard. The bum was very clever. He was a more formidable opponent than Chou realized. He was more than a drunken vagrant as his informer told him. He was a shrewd and careful street survivor. Chou had encountered these kinds of people before. He knew they meant trouble. He had always successfully disposed of them, but not before they gave him trouble.

He felt the side of his sharp-jawed face and found the pencil thin scar that ran from his cheek to his jawline. He felt it and remembered how he got it. Another bum. It was several years ago. A street derelict that was sleeping off a drunk in this very alley. He reached inside the sleeping man's coat and pulled out a dilapidated nylon wallet. He remembered thinking that the tramp probably got it from a trash dumpster. The only card in the wallet was a V.A. Hospital I.D. The bum was a Vietnam Vet in the alcohol rehabilitation program at the Santa Monica outpatient unit. Chou laughed to himself. Another drunken American G.I. How many had he seen wandering this neighborhood? *How many Americans had his grandfather killed as an NVA soldier in the Vietnam War*, he thought as he smiled to himself. Chou looked for cash and found two dollars, which he removed from the bum's wallet before throwing it onto the ground.

He turned to exit the alley when he felt his knees buckle from a well-placed kick from behind. He looked up and saw the bum standing over him. The bum was dancing like an extra in a Bruce Lee movie. Chou reached inside his coat for his knife but before he could clear his inside vest pocket the bum launched a half moon kick accompanied by a shriek that would wake up the dead. Chou's blade fell to the asphalt and skittered down the alley leaving a trail of sparks on the rough pavement.

Chou was stunned. How could this stumblebum be whipping his ass so bad? He looked up from where he lay. The bum was still energetically dancing around his prone body. He looked like the winning contestant at a Tai Chi competition. The bum was focused. Chou's eyes were out of focus. He looked over to where his weapon had finally settled. *Too far to make a run*, he thought, *unless I want this guy to tap dance on my rib cage*.

His mind was a blur, as all sorts of scenario's danced in his head. All of them involved personal pain. His personal pain! In the end, he just laid down and

feigned unconsciousness, laying in a pool of his own blood. The blood gushed from a gash inflicted by the first moon kick thrown by the bum. He heard the bums' footfalls as his tormentor exited the alley, and only then, did he know it was safe for him to move. Later that day he assembled several of his cohorts, telling them to find a bum that resembled Charley Manson and had the moves of Chuck Norris. "Find the G.I. and kill him." That was the order he gave. He never saw the bum around Little Saigon again.

Willy heard the commotion in the alley from across the street... the booze had dulled some of his senses, but his hearing was still perfect. He hid behind an old ford truck, notebook in hand. He continued to watch from his new clandestine location while carefully taking notes. He could see his cardboard home flying in all directions. He even glimpsed Chou as he passed into view for the briefest of seconds. It was the VC. The same VC he'd seen in the other alley when he made himself invisible.

Willy felt a rush of adrenaline as he silently strode across the street. He hugged the wall adjacent to the alley and listened. He knew it was a dead-end alley. The VC was trapped. He felt inside his coat and his hand found the handle of the 8" butcher knife he stole from the kitchen of the Club Saigon. He removed it from his coat and waited in the half-light of early morning.

Chou was frustrated, having shred and re-shred every piece of cardboard in the alley. Now the bum that killed Ke Son Nu would see the mess and get legs for another part of town. He would be afraid, and fear would take him far away from the scene of his crime. Chou wiped his sweating forehead and straightened his hair. He stepped gingerly from the alley, the heels of his two-hundred-dollar hand sewn Italian shoes clicked on the pavement as he made his way back to Main Street.

Just as Chou reached the street, Willy stepped out from behind the corner. He stood directly in front of the VC, a smile creasing his lips. Chou was surprised and astonished at the arrogance of the man. He jumped back a step, holding his machete at the ready. "I've tracked you for many days G.I.," he said, as he looked directly into Willy's eyes. There was no fear in them. They were like placid, limpid pools. He could throw a stone into them and watch them change as the fear took over. "You killed a friend of mine G.I. Now you must pay for your crime." He continued to stare, his words choking in his throat. Still, the fear he wished to evoke had not shown itself. He stepped back another pace to give himself more swinging room with the two-foot-long blade he held.

Willy advanced a pace, then another, reducing the space between them to just inches. He looked into the VC's eyes and saw the consternation and dismay of the hunter turned hunted. Willy knew from long experience in the jungle that the fear would soon manifest itself, not in Willy Beal, but in Chou.

Chou took several quick steps backward, retreating, he suddenly found himself in the shadows of the alley... Willy's alley, his home, his turf. He was ankle deep in the remains of Willy's castle. His expensive, leather soled shoes slipped from side to side on the slick cardboard. "I warn you G.I. stay away from me or I'll kill you." Willy could now hear the fear really creep into Chou's voice. *It was an idle threat from a cornered man that couldn't back it up*, Willy thought.

The fear had kicked in. Willy knew in his heart and mind he had now become the hunter. His prey, armed as he was, cowered in front of him. He watched as the blade of the machete was raised above Chou's head. Raised with shaking arms, nervous hands, and eyes that told Willy he would rather be somewhere else. Gunner, when they were on the team together, had taught Willy about controlling fear. "You control your own fear Willy. Push it deep down inside you and like a piston in a cold engine, your adrenaline will surge to the surface and

act as a catalyst for your survival skills.” It was good advice in the jungles of Vietnam and it was good advice in the alleys of Little Saigon, the alleys Willy called home. Willy knew it was just a matter of time until the VC dropped the machete and fell to his knees begging for his life. This guy was like all the Vietnamese wise guys he had ever known. All blow and no go!

“I don't think so,” Willy said. “You're so fucking scared now the only organ you've got working for you is your bladder.”

Willy was right. Chou lost whatever concentration he had and looked at the spreading wet spot on the front of his expensive silk pants. The machete felt like it weighed two-hundred pounds as his skinny wrists and hands let go of it and it fell onto the pavement. Chou thought back to the last time he had faced “a bum” in an alley. *He remembered having to play possum in order to survive. He hoped as he looked into Willy's unflinching eyes, that this time, he would survive. But, he knew in his heart that it wasn't likely. What was wrong with him,* he thought. He was certain this was the man that killed Ke Son Nu. His anger should be enough to fuel his body into affirmative action. But it wasn't enough! He stood shaking in front of this bum, pissing his pants, and at his mercy.

The kick came out of nowhere. Nowhere being the Bruce Lee mindset of an ex-Special Forces Trooper named Willy Beal. Willy remembered the training he'd received at Fort Bragg. His brain remembered, his heart remembered, and most of all, now that he was sober again, his feet remembered.

His name was SFC Judd. Judd was his Sensei, the Japanese word for teacher. Judd taught him discipline; mental and bodily discipline. Judd taught him all the moves, the punches, and the kicks. Judd taught Willy to be as graceful as a gazelle through the katas of Tai Kwon Do. But, above all, Judd taught trooper William Baines Beal to be a trained, and effective, hand to hand, killer.

Willy Beal was not invisible on this occasion. Far from it. To Chou Lai, he was as visible as his own dwindling life force. Willy had chosen a new mindset. He was in the jungle and must dispatch his enemy without firing a burst from his AR-15. Silent and deadly, that was what he'd learned from Judd. "Termination with extreme prejudice" was what Judd had called it.

Chou had already begun to fall from the first kick when Willy, standing directly in front of him, rolled his fingers into a tight ball and delivered a straight palm thrust that splintered his nose and drove the bones into Chou Lai's brain. It was over as quick as that. Chou felt the pain of his testicles being driven up into his gut then a flash of light and he was gone. His dead eyes stared straight up from where he lay on his back, testimony to the deadly skill of Willy Beal when he was in the jungle and cornered by an enemy that wanted to kill him. Willy looked down at the VC laying prone on the pavement. Willy Remembered an utterance that he'd heard in a Clint Eastwood movie that seemed appropriate now. Willy Beal had become "a legend in his own mind."

Willy thought about a story he'd been told by Jerry the night after the big party in Pleiku. Jerry swore him to secrecy, then told Willy that Gunner had killed an ARVN soldier, disfigured him, and dumped his body into a 55-gallon drum behind the Club Saigon. It seemed appropriate for Willy to now do the same thing. He dragged the lifeless body of the VC further back into the alley and propped it up against the dumpster. Willy reached inside his tattered coat and drew out the butcher knife. He quickly and efficiently sliced off the right ear of the VC and stuck it in his pocket. After dumping the body into the dumpster, he went back to where his home had been and picked up the cardboard, carefully stacking it over the body of Chou Lai until the body was not visible to the casual passing eye. He took out his notebook and noted the time and place of death. Willy, his work done,

casually left the recesses of the alley whistling a tune that Barry Sadler made famous during the Vietnam War. “Fighting soldiers from the sky. Fearless men who jump and die.....The brave men of the Green Beret.” Willy remembered reading somewhere that Barry had been killed in some third world toilet. *This one's for you Barry*, he thought as the first light of morning struck his face.



As the chopper settled gently onto the cleared LZ, the whump, whump, whump, of the main rotor blades brought back memories of Nam. I followed Gunner out the side door and pushed into the lush tropical foliage that surrounded the helipad. “Wait here, Jerry. My people will be back here after they make sure the perimeter is still secure. My man Xuan Thai secures our AO before and after each landing. He used to be the head of security for a general by the name of Nam Phat before General Phat was killed.” I knew better than to ask how the general died. “There’s Xuan now,” he said, pointing across the LZ. He looked like little more than a kid to me, but Gunner's glowing expression of adulation seemed to indicate that Xuan had made his bones and had earned Gunnerns respect.

“Looks like a kid to me. You sure his nuts have dropped down into his scrotum yet Gunner?”

“That kid would kill you in a heartbeat, Jerry. By the way, I'll introduce you to Xuan as Jack Dorn. It'll be less complicated that way.”

“Where are we going?”

“Can’t tell you Jack, but I can tell you that you'll get an education. I hope you don't mind working with the southeast Asians. Most of my strike force and

field hands are Thai's. I do have a few Cambodians working for me at my processing plant, but the majority of my troops are from Thailand.”

It was beginning to look like Gunner was taking me into his confidence, as he was talking freely about his drug operation. I began to feel a lot less nervous about my situation. “I’ll try and keep that in mind. Hopefully, I won’t have any flashbacks.” We both laughed as Xuan approached and extended his hand.

Gunner introduced me as Jack Dorn. He told Xuan that I was a former American mercenary, currently engaged in the arms business. Xuan's face lit up when he heard that I was an arms dealer. “Perhaps I will give you a list of weapons that I need. I am constantly upgrading the high level of security that I run for Mr. McConnell’s operation,” he said in perfect English.

“I’m sure I can accommodate your arms order Xuan.”

Gunner looked at me with a smile as wide as the L.A. freeway. “The kid speaks better English than we do. I've had him tutored since he was just out of knee pants.”

“He doesn't look like he's much out of knee pants now,” I said.

“Remember what I told you about Xuan, Jack. He's a lot older than he looks, especially in terms of his combat and martial arts experience,” he said almost inaudibly under his breath.

Xuan moved the column out. I estimated that they were a well-armed, platoon-sized unit. About thirty men. They all looked so young. It reminded me of some of the Montagnard strikers we had on the old team. Xuan let five men pass, then he got into the column right behind his radio operator. Another five went by then Gunner and I slid into place. The jungle swallowed up our column like a Boa Constrictor eating a long lizard.

THIRTY

The veteran's demonstration had turned real ugly and Willy was enjoying every minute of it. Willy was on the inside looking out, but it could be construed as being on the outside looking in. It was reminiscent of when he was a young boy. His mom had gotten him an aquarium for his tenth birthday. He had a variety of fish, some small, some large, some that sucked off the glass, and others that hung out on the bottom. Willy remembered how he used to endlessly watch them. The fish became all the brothers and sisters he never had. He named them. He fed them. He cleaned up after them. He controlled the amount of air they got from the air pump and the temperature of their water.

By age eleven he was breeding fish in his aquarium. His aquarium had become the microcosm of life on the planet. The natural order of things was revealed to him through the clear glass of his aquarium.

For his twelfth birthday, Willy asked his mom to get him a new kind of fish. He had heard of a fish called a Cichlid. It was a tropical fish found in the freshwater streams of South America. At that time, there weren't many books written on the habits of Cichlids, but Willy knew he wanted them. He would find out firsthand how they would adapt with his other fish and work into the underwater community. He never remembered being happier than the day his mom brought home a breeding pair of Cichlids known more commonly as "Oscars." They were only about two-inches-long and fit in nicely with the guppies, mollies, and neon tetra's that he already had in the tank.

Willy began to watch his new fish. He noticed that they were very social, always swimming together, eating together, and sleeping together. When Willy

would press his face to the glass, the little Oscars would come up to him and look him right in the face, their orange eyes articulating in all directions as they curiously eyed him. He later surmised it was part of their nature to be curious. They liked him... he was sure of that.

Young William Beal started taking notes in a spiral binder regarding their behavior. He was captivated by his new fish, seemingly forgetting the other fish in the tank. It was his study of the Oscars that showed him the benefits of careful notetaking. He had the Oscars to thank for the notes he had taken during his surveillance of Vinh Ho.

As the Oscars got bigger his other fish became withdrawn. They were unwilling and probably afraid to share tank space and chose to hang out in the sedge grasses and under rocks at the bottom of the aquarium. It was at this point Willy theorized that life in his fish tank was indeed a reflection of life on the planet as a whole. He was so sure of his hypothesis that he wrote it in his notebook.

Willy's Oscars had grown to four inches in length and two in girth by this time. They were voracious eaters. One morning Willy noticed that most of the baby guppies, that proliferated in his tank, were missing. Soon they were all gone. Then the adult guppies went one for a time until there were none left. Willy noted in his notebook that the increase in the size of the Oscars was proportional to the decrease in mass of his guppies. Soon the Neon Tetras were history and the Oscars got bigger yet. Next, the Mollies went, and the Oscars got even bigger. Soon the only fish left in the tank were the Oscars and they had grown another inch in length and girth.

The cycle was not yet complete. Willy noted that he had observed birth, life, and death by ingestion in his tank. He personally experienced companionship and love. All substantive issues that would prove his hypothesis. Then came pestilence. The Oscars created a heavy ammonia environment through decay of their

biological products of ingestion. Their eyes bulged and turned a milky gray, their skin pallor glazed white. By the time Willy figured out what to do it was too late. Both his Oscars died, and he experienced grief. He cried outwardly when he saw them floating belly up in the tank. For several days after that experience the remorse he felt dominated his life. Then one morning he woke up knowing his hypothesis was correct. The planet was like a fish bowl. From that day forward Willy Beal never cried over the death of anything again.

As he looked through the pane of glass that separated him from the veterans on the sidewalk he was reminded of his fishbowl. An older Willy now pressed his nose to the glass. The veterans were the guppies and Vinh Ho's goons were the Oscars... and the oriental Oscar's were getting hungrier the more they were baited. What's wrong with the guppies? They should know better than to come out from under the rocks that the government had given them to hide under. If this thing continued to escalate they would be eaten for sure. Willy thought for a moment then walked away from the window. *It would be best for his survival if they did engage.* Willy Beal smiled to himself as he walked away and into the crowded room.

That's the way it goes in the fishbowl, he thought with no remorse. When Willy first saw the poster, he began to plan the operation against his former foe. He knew a lot of "street veterans." That's what he called them anyway. They were down and outers, much like himself, that could not adjust to civilian life after Vietnam. They lived on the streets, drank cheap wine, and slept on park benches and in dumpsters when they could find one that wasn't being used. Willy got the word out as soon as the poster appeared. When the candidate announced a reception, it seemed like the perfect time to organize a demonstration. Willy had arranged the demonstration to cover his activities. He failed to tell the "street

veterans” that they represented nothing more than cannon fodder for his operation. He failed to tell them that they were expendable, just like they had been expendable in Vietnam. If there was one precept of communism that he agreed with, it was, “the end justifies the means.”

Xuan stood at the edge of the river and waited. Gunner was behind me. A rough dugout boat, carved from a log, stood next to the river bank. “Jerry.” The word shot through me like a thirty-caliber round. He'd used my real name for the second time in front of Xuan. My cover was blown, and I knew it.

“This is as far as you go with us Jerry. Or should I refer to you as detective Jerry Andrews, LAPD?”

“What the fuck are you talking about Gunner,” I lied, turning to face him.

“Don’t insult my intelligence Jerry. I ran your prints from a glass you used at the club. George gave me the report just before we left on this adventure. It's really too bad. I would have enjoyed partnering up with you again, just like when we were on the team together.”

“What makes you think I'd be partners with a drug dealing scumbag like you Gunner?” I said boldly, but with a touch of fear in my voice.

“Because it would have beat what's going to happen to you now.”

I heard the crack and felt the base of my skull cave in. Xuan had hit me from behind as I stood nose to nose with Gunner. My head felt like someone had driven a hot, pointed stick, into my brain. My eyelids folded over, like a window shade being drawn and night came early.

The rain hit my face stinging me into consciousness. I slowly opened my eyes, trying desperately to survey the situation. I tried to move my arms, but they were tied tightly with hemp to the bow of the dugout canoe. I didn't have a shirt on, but I knew instinctively that I wasn't in danger of freezing. I tried to move my legs,

but they were similarly tied to the stern. I noticed the passing jungle foliage and knew that the boat I was tied in was moving with the current.

Gunner... His name jumped into my fuzzy consciousness. He and Xuan had done this to me. At least, I wasn't dead. I asked myself why hadn't he just killed me? I had no idea. It was unlike Gunner to be so generous with human life, especially with someone that had fucked him over and deceived him like I had. *I thought about all those earless Vietnamese in Little Saigon. They hadn't been so lucky. I bet they wish they could have been set adrift in a wooden boat.*

Gunner was a perverse, tenacious human being. If he did let me go it was only because he expected something worse to happen to me than just dying by his hands. Maybe he wanted to hang around and torture me but didn't have the time? Maybe Frank was hot on his trail? No... I gave up hope on that idea. Gunner had cut the collar off my fatigue shirt and buttoned it around my neck. He must have known all along that I had a transmitting device and where it was hidden. The guy had nerves of steel. If the transmitter was working, Frank was following me down this dead-end jungle tributary. I was sure Gunner had planned it that way to lead Frank on a wild goose chase.

The ropes were tied around my wrists and feet and then tied to the cross members of the boat. I tried to work out of the ropes but the harder I struggled the more the boat rocked. I came very close to capsizing the canoe twice before I realized that Gunner had planned this all along. He wanted me to drown in some backwater cesspool deep in the jungle or be eaten alive by the voracious mosquitoes. I was determined not to give him the satisfaction, so I stopped struggling.

I wondered how long I could go without food or water? It Seems stupid to be so close to water and be worried about dying of thirst, but that's the position I found myself in. The food was another matter. I looked down the length of my

torso and realized that I could live off the fat of the land for quite some time before I would succumb to death by starvation.

The pain in the back of my head had begun to subside. I had to be able to think if I had any chance at all of surviving out here. My eyes glanced to the left and I noticed that the boat had begun to travel faster than it did earlier. I had no idea where I was or where I was heading? I shifted my weight forward, then back, trying to move the boat to the shore without it capsizing. The current was too swift. I was traveling midstream and the jungle canopy that had earlier shaded me, gave way to direct sunlight. I felt the skin on my chest begin to burn. The humidity made me sweat profusely. I rolled my head from side to side trying to catch droplets of the salty moisture on the end of my tongue. My head began to pound from the heat. Where the hell was Frank? He was supposed to be following me. I yelled as loud as I could. "FRANK! FRANK HELP ME!" My shouts woke up the birds and monkeys. Then, they raised a noise that drowned out my pitiful cries.

I had been on the river for several hours. I felt it getting wider and drastically picking up speed. The canoe bumped hard into a huge rock which almost capsized my canoe. I continued to pick up speed. I hit another rock, then another. I noticed that the animal sounds had disappeared except for one. I was oblivious to the hot sun that was ravaging my body. The speed of the river created a draft across my body. It was like a cool oasis in the middle of the desert. I must be fading into delirium. My mind tried to sort out the only animal sound that I could hear. WHUMP.WHUMP. WHUMP. Could it be that it was not an animal? I vaguely remembered, as my delirium abated for a moment, that a helicopter sounded like that. I snapped up, straining at my bonds. Frank had followed me in his helicopter. He and Enrique were here to save me. I still hadn't seen them when I heard the roar coming from downstream. I was still picking up speed and the boat had begun to slowly spin. It was like riding one of those carnival rides that my

older brother use to take me on when I was a kid; only this ride had taken on the proportions of the fright house instead of the Ferris wheel.

WHUMP.WHUMP. WHUMP. The chopper was directly overhead. I could see Frank leaning out the door, straining against his safety harness. He was lowering a hook on the end of a steel cable. I yelled. “Frank. Frank, you found me,” but I was sure he couldn't hear me over the roar of the... falls.

The noise from the chopper became secondary to me now. Here I was tied to a small boat, bobbing like a cork in a typhoon. I was about to be swept over, what sounded like, Schweitzer Falls. The sound was deafening. I really began to notice it and It had to be a high waterfall; Why else was I now aware of the rising mist falling all over me like a jungle monsoon rain. I closed my eyes and prayed. I asked the lord to forgive me for all the things I was forced to do when I was in Nam. I asked him to look out for Willy and cure him of his alcoholism. But most of all... I asked him to save me!

The hook came down and paused above the boat. It was not steady enough. Frank made several stabs at hooking my ropes but failed. The hook hit me in the face twice then in the chest. If he could only get it near my hands I might be able to work it over the ropes that held me. I wasn't sure that they were strong enough to support me when the chopper lifted me and the boat out of the raging water. Without being able to see, I couldn't tell if the waterfall was five feet in front of me or five hundred.

The roar got louder, and I might as well have been underwater from the soaking I was getting from the mist. I looked up praying for a miracle. There apparently was not enough time for the cable to be retracted, which told me the falls were very near now. Frank wrapped his arms around the steel cable and began sliding down toward me. He slid down my lifeline until he was just a foot above the boat, standing on the top of the hook. He reached down, glancing ahead, trying

to grab hold of the boat. His eyes got real big as he held the gunnel, steadying the canoe with only one hand. He let go for a fraction of a second then reached down again and slid the hook between my hands and the rope. No time elapsed between that movement and the time we flew over the end of the waterfall. I looked down from my spinning boat and saw the river hundreds of feet below us. The cable slowly reeled us in and the roar of the falls gave way to the WHUMP...

WHUMP... WHUMP of the helicopter. I looked toward the cockpit but didn't see Enrique. I didn't recognize our new chopper pilot as he stared back at me through his aviator glasses.

Frank directed the helicopter back to the clearing where Enrique's chopper had set down for the last time. He knew that he would not catch up with Gunner after he had been swallowed up by the jungle. Gunner was too shrewd for that. Frank saw little value in destroying the cash crop on the ground, knowing a lot of innocent people would be killed in the operation. He knew that Gunners Familial Army would just set up in another area and be ready to ship in another three months' time.

I got out of our chopper as it touched down in the clearing and walked over to where Enrique's body lay, half exposed, in the pilot's seat. I noticed his head had been taken and heard the incessant buzzing coming from the seat where his headless body now sat, becoming a meal and breeding ground for the blow flies. Instinctively I knew what Gunner had done. I had used the same stunt before in Nam. It was designed to frighten the enemy to slow down his advance on your position. It was an old Montagnard trick. I had used it just like everyone else on the team. Gunner especially liked to use it when he was in Nam, and from the expression on Enrique Sandoval's eyeless face, still found it to be a useful, and intimidating, tool.

In '68, we were on a recon mission near Ban Me Thuot. The regular Army had just gotten their asses kicked really bad by a combined force of NVA regulars and Viet Cong. We were sent in to cover their escape. I thought it was odd that the Army would send in two Americans and a dozen 'Yards to keep “Charley” from overrunning two battalions of the regular Army. We had been used as cannon fodder by General 'Waste-more-land' before, and this was beginning to look like one of those times.

Gunner was his usual self, the consummate jungle fighter, the macho man of southeast Asia. We had just come through a village and encountered some resistance. “Charley” was hot on our heels and we hoped to lead them in another direction. A direction away from the main column of mostly wounded Americans that were down the trail about two 'clicks' east of us. My field map said we were in a village by the name of Kon Ti Kia. The 'Yards did a recon of the village and brought out two Vietnamese clad in black pajamas. Our Montagnard recon leader, a Banai Montagnard by the name of Kim, said they were VC sympathizers.

That's all that Gunner needed to set him off. The next thing I know Gunner walks out of a jungle thicket sharpening a bamboo pole he had just cut. He walks right up to the kneeling VC's and jerks one up abruptly and begins to question him. He spits out his questions like a madman. “You VC?” The man, his eyes looking at his feet, his hands tied behind his back, didn't say a thing.

Gunner pulls him closer. They were eye to eye now. “You VC motherfucker,” he said vehemently as he kept eye contact? I knew he was looking for “the fear” and if he didn't see it soon he'd move on to the other prisoner.

Gunner stepped back, and as he did, the VC looks straight into his eyes and boldly said in broken English, “The only mother I fuck G.I. is yours.”

“You VC pig,” he shouted. Then Gunner thrusts out with the bamboo spear and skewers the VC so hard that the spear goes right through the VC's heart and

comes out his back. It only took an instant. Gunner thrust forward then put his boot on the VC's chest and pulled the lance out of him. The VC fell dead, eyes glazed in shocked surprise, and drooling blood, at Gunners' feet.

I looked over at the other VC. He had “the fear.” In fact, he was scared shitless. Gunner points the bamboo spear at him then walks up and wipes the blood off it and onto the VC's black shirt. Gunner takes some blood off the prisoners' shirt and traces his initials, R M, on each cheek. “You VC,” he shouts?

The man looks at the ground from his kneeling position and speaks. “No sir, I no VC... I just a peasant farmer.”

Gunner draws his machete out of its scabbard and points it at the prisoner. “You lie. You VC motherfucker.” then he swings the machete and the man's head falls next to his kneeling body. Blood coursed out of his neck and covered the front of his shirt, dripping onto the ground at his knees. It all happened so fast that the prisoners dead body never fell over. *I figured it took a while before he knew he was dead.* I asked myself why he had done that. *Why had Gunner not giving the prisoner a chance to answer? It was a rhetorical question. I knew the answer almost before the thought came into my head. Gunner didn't want to find out that another VC had fucked his mother.*

As we left the village I noticed the head of the second prisoner was stuck on the end of a blood-soaked pole. Kim noticed my look of dismay. He walked up to me and said, “old Montagnard tradition. VC does not follow us so fast after they see a head on the pole. They know we be ruthless if we meet in combat. They think twice before they follow us.”



Frank checked the clearing one last time, then set two bars of C-4 plastic explosive. He put one on the front instrument panel and the other he stuck to the outside of the engine compartment. He deftly tied them together with a radio control detonation device wired to the blasting caps that he placed in each charge. “Let’s saddle up and get out of here,” he shouted to his other field commanders. “Back to Bangkok!”

I sat in the seat of his command chopper, still in shock from my ride down the river. Frank got into the helicopter and we began to rise, following the string of choppers heading back to Bangkok. I watched him as he sat in the front seat. Frank pulled out the antenna on his handheld detonator and emotionlessly pushed the button. The enormous orange fireball that turned Enrique Sandoval into a cinder propelled skyward, chased by a plume of blue-black smoke. The blast scorched the clearing, leaving the LZ fifty meters more in diameter than it originally had been. I’d seen a lot of scorched earth back in Nam and this was no different.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Room 410 in the Cardiac Care Unit was a pleasant, airy, single patient room usually reserved for V.I. P's (Very Important Patients). Jimmy Trinh had arranged for LAPD security on the door, and a Vietnamese cook to provide food for his beleaguered boss. Vinh Ho's doctor, Dr. Warren Phun, had been called to the hospital right after Vinh was admitted, and served, with special dispensation, as a consulting physician, even though he had not been accredited by the hospital to practice there.

Dr. Phun had set up a proper diet for his patient, arranging for some preparation space to be made available in the hospital kitchen. The hospital administrator was more than eager to please his new patient, remembering the five-thousand-dollar donation that was made on behalf of the businessmen of Little Saigon.

Jimmy Trinh sat at the foot of the old man's bed, wondering what else he should do. He had made all the security arrangements, notified Mr. McConnell and sent a driver for him, called in Vinh Ho's personal physician, and contacted the chef at the restaurant, telling him to close down the place and get over to hospital

kitchen. Jimmy was proud of the way he had taken the bull by the horns and taken charge. Now, seated at the foot of his boss' bed he waited, the heart-lung monitor tracing eerie trails of garish green across the cross-hatched monitor. The steady BEEP...BEEP...BEEP of the auditory channel rang in his ears reminding him of his own fleeting mortality.

Jimmy heard the noise of voices raised in anger coming from the hallway outside the room. He got up to check and found Gunner McConnell nose to nose with the police officer who was guarding the door. The cop was pissed, spitting his words into Gunners' face. "I have orders not to let anyone in without Mr. Tranh's permission. You and Mr. Moto here better get the hell out before I turn you both into Chicken Sushi."

Gunner came back at the cop with the venom of an agitated pit viper. "You and what Army's going to keep me from seeing the boss, PIG!" Gunner stepped back a couple of paces, so he had room to let fly with some karate moves. Nguyen reached behind him into the waistband of his pants and cradled the Berretta 9MM that he had concealed.

"Easy gentlemen," Jimmy said as he entered the hallway. "I'm sorry, officer. These two gentlemen have permission to visit Mr. Ho, anytime."

"Anything you say Mr. Tranh. My chief told me to do as instructed by you and Mr. Ho. You can tell your friends here that the next time I'm addressed as PIG; all bets are off."

"I understand officer. Now, if you'll stand aside, Mr. Ho would like to see these gentlemen."

The cop sat back down in his chair next to the door. As Gunner walked past him he said only one word... "OINK!"

The disguise was good enough to get me into the hospital, but, once inside I need to look like I belonged. I took a wheelchair from the emergency room and began pushing it down the corridor of the first floor. I pointed it in the direction of the hospital laundry, where I stopped long enough to obtain a set of hospital greens, a blue bathrobe, and a pair of paper slippers. I sat down in the wheelchair and became a patient.

As I toured the bottom floor of the hospital looking for an elevator, I noticed that nobody perceived me as anything other than just another patient. It was apparent to me that my new disguise was working perfectly. Because of my recent undercover activities, I had become a master of disguise. I thought about Willy for a moment, remembering how he used to talk about being invisible. It came to me just then that he wasn't talking through demented lips. He didn't mean invisible in the sense of not having a physical manifestation. He really meant that in his own way he could meld into his surroundings concealed by disguise, chameleon-like, not physically vanishing like particles dispersed by the transporter in a Star Trek adventure. I found the elevator and wheeled inside, pressing the button for the fourth floor. As the doors closed I mouthed the words, "beam me up, Scotty."

After leaving the 44 Magnum, he joined some of his street pals, the same guys that were at the demonstration in front of The Little Saigon, and revealed his plan to them. He swore them to silence as he passed an old fedora around the circle. "Pretend it's the collection plate at your favorite place of worship boys. Help an old altar boy out won't ya." Willy cajoled them on, "Pretend you're shelling out for a good piece of Saigon ass. Send old Willy off in style." The hat went around several times, each time more change was coughed up grudgingly by the vets who had become winos. A few bills showed up and that's when Willy pulled in the hat and put the contents into the pockets of his polyester threads.

“I don't know how to repay your generosity boys, but, someday I will.” He pulled out the velvet Crown Royal bag and showed it to the group, holding it as high as his arms would allow. “The next time we see each other this bag will hold his.....” his voice trailed off.

One of the drunks slurred out, “Nuts. It'll hold the VC's nuts, right Willy?”

“Yeah, that's right. I'll be bringing you boys back a little memento from this operation. I want you to know that I appreciate what you're giving up, so I can ride in style over to that hospital and complete my mission. When it's done I'll be back to join you for a little drink and some damn good war stories. Until then, adios brothers.”

Willy arrived at Santa Monica General by taxi, paying the fare with money collected from his vagabond veteran friends. Willy paid the six-dollar fare with a ten spot, taking the four bucks in change back and stuffing it in his coat pocket, giving no tip to the driver. The taxi driver gave him the stink-eye but Willy could care less. He noted that he still had lots of change left over from the collection hat, hopefully, he'd have enough to buy his bud's a jug when he returned.

Henry Davis was beside himself. Sure, Inspector Fitzsimmons was more than capable of carrying on the investigation, collecting the physical evidence, photographs, and the like, but he hadn't been at the heart of the slasher murders since they started. The one officer capable of briefing the mayor and the chief was off somewhere, breaking police procedure, and his balls, by not notifying his supervisor of his whereabouts. Davis was heard several times that day yelling around the precinct house, “I'm going to have Andrews' ass for this. Who the hell does he think he is going off half-cocked leaving a green team to investigate one of his homicides.”

It was three hours after Jerry's last radio transmission. The phone in Captain Davis' office rang. "Davis here. How can I help you?"

"Sorry about being out of touch for so long, Cap. It's Jerry, I'm on another stakeout. I can't talk too long but I'm getting close to solving the case."

"Where the fuck are you, Andrews? The Chief and the Mayor are screaming for information and all I can do is direct them to the newspapers."

"Look, Captain, it's because of the leak that I don't want to say anything. I'm deep undercover right now." I wasn't lying about that little detail, but this was on a "need to know" basis and I figured the Captain didn't need to know. Rita arranged for me to have the room right across the hall from Vinh Ho's. I could observe everything and everyone, that came and went into room 410.

Nothing in this life comes for free and I had to promise "Big Mama" some prime time in my room in order to get her to assign it to the department. In the airborne, we used to call girls as big as Rita "Heavy Drop." That put them in the same class as trucks and tanks which we hooked up to parachutes and dropped out of C-130's. She promised me a good time, so who was I to refuse her advances. She was no Yin and Yang, but what the hell. Back at the station, I was known as a team player, but this was stretching it, taking one for the team... the good old LAPD.

The officer guarding the door to 410 leaned back in his chair and didn't notice me as I wheeled my chair into 409. I tried the door from the inside several times, noting that I could open it ever so slightly, place a paper obstruction under the door, turn out the light, and observe everything across the hall without being seen.

Room 410 looked like a Vietcong convention. I noted that two Vietnamese, one much larger than the other, came and went into the room several times. I assumed they were family or bodyguards. A bulge gave away that the bigger one

carried a gun in the waistband of his pants, partially obscured by his sports jacket. The smaller one seemed to be giving all the orders. I saw a Vietnamese doctor come and go. He had a chart and was writing on it. Another oriental, dressed in white, and wearing the tall white hat of a chef, brought a tray of food into the room. He was the chef at the Club Saigon. I recognized him from my last visit. Last but not least was Gunner McConnell; He left only once, returning within thirty minutes. As the door to Vinh's room opened I briefly noticed that Gunner sat down next to Colonel Ho and bent to whisper something in his ear. Colonel Ho grasped his hand as the door terminated my view.

I went to my room phone and called the precinct house. "Captain Henry Davis please."

Fitz was on the phone. "Is that you Jerry?"

"Get Davis on the line pronto, Fitz. I don't have time to talk with anyone else." The line went dead for a moment.

"Jerry, this is Henry. You alright?"

"Fine Cap. I need a phone tap and a wire put into the Cardiac Care Unit, room 410. You think you can do that for me."

"I could if I had justification. How's this for justification. Room 410 contains the head of the Little Saigon Crime Club. One of his major dealers is in there with him, and I think they're involved in the slasher killings."

"Sounds like you have plenty of reasons to get the O.K. for a wiretap and the bug. I'll get with the Chief and let him and the Mayor politic this one through channels. When do you need it?"

"Yesterday, Cap... yesterday. See if you can get me a line into this room so I can follow their movements better."

"What room are you in Jerry?"

“This is just between you and me skipper. Remember we still have a leak in our department. If McConnell gets on to me, I'm dead meat this time.”

“I understand Jerry. It's between us. Nobody else will know.”

“Room 409, Cardiac Care Unit. Oh yeah, run a background check on the cop that's stationed on Colonel Ho's front door. His badge said he was from Parker Center. Shield number 2513. Make sure you use some of your political juice to secure my telephone line in this room, Cap.”

“I'll do the best I can Jerry. You really feel like you're close to solving this one, don't you?”

“I can taste it, Cap. Trust me on this one. Neither one of us will have to retire just yet.”

FORTY-TWO

After he entered his closet, Willy had been careful to jam the lock from the inside and stuff rags across the bottom of the door. He then pulled the light chain, marveling at all that he had accomplished while right under the noses of the V.C. Willy had stashed his “go to meeting” polyester suit in the bottom of his closet under some cardboard boxes. He quickly found it, holding it up and admiring it in the low light provided by the 30-WATT incandescent bulb.

He felt for the tiny slit on the back side of the right lapel of his polyester jacket. He found it easily and then proceeded to push with his thumb and forefinger until the tip of a wire appeared. He grabbed it and gave a steady tug until all eighteen inches of piano wire was removed. In the pocket of his jacket, he removed two pieces of elongated, round hardwood, each with a small hole drilled through the circumference. He attached the wire with a handle on each end admiring his work with a critical eye. The garrote was Willy's first weapon of choice when it came to silent killing, and he was an expert with it.

Willy Beal turned off the light in his closet for the last time as he prepared himself to complete his final mission. He removed the rags from under the door sill and, seeing no light emanating from under it, went out into the empty kitchen. It was pitch dark except for the occasional glare of a headlight that went through the front window, and reflected in the back-bar mirror like the phasers from the Starship Enterprise. Willy kept low and loose, moving silently and, as always, invisibly.

He reached the corner of the kitchen and peered around the swinging half doors into the main restaurant. It was dark except for the telltale glow of a cigarette

coming from a table near the front entrance. He heard the heavy breathing of the V.C. as he sucked in on the noxious weed then exhaled a stream of smoke into the stale air. Willy had seen this man before at the hospital. He was one of the V.C. in the room with Vinh Ho when Doctor Willy Beal made his rounds.

He was a young man with a stocky build, about five feet eight as he remembered. He was too young to have been over in Nam during the war. He must just be another Vietnamese punk. "Don't underestimate your foe." That's what Preacher told him once, just before a field operation. *This one's for you Preacher*, he thought, as his hands tightened around the handles of his garrote.

It had been so easy. It was late, three-thirty a.m. The club had been closed up for hours and he knew it was empty. Willy came out of his closet to get a sandwich when suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, he had this inspiration. I've got my knife, which nobody missed when I stole it. He reached inside his shirt reassuringly and felt the smooth wood handle. I'll bet they wouldn't miss a piano wire either.

Willy had been lulled to sleep on many nights by the sound of the baby grand playing in the piano bar. He liked lounge music but seldom in the past ten years had he had the opportunity to enjoy it. I mean how much enjoyment can you get listening to piano music while you're getting drunk in an alley.

There was nobody in the restaurant at that hour and it was easy. Willy just walks across the lounge in the dark to where the piano stood. He found himself a narrow gauge lower E string and removed it. On the way back to his closet he stopped at the bar and found two old corkscrews, not the yuppie kind, but the kind that you actually have to screw into the cork. He took them back to his closet and when he had time, removed the metal corkscrews, leaving him with two handles for his new weapon. It was turning out to be an interesting field exercise for Willy Beal. It was nice to have the freedom to operate and control the elements of his mission. It hadn't always been that way for him.

In a country as volatile as Vietnam in the late sixties, field operations had become increasingly treacherous. You never knew who to trust. Yesterday's best friend was today's worst enemy. Nationalism ran a close second to Communism and life ran a not so close second to death. Willy Beal found himself on the brink of extinction one afternoon in the Ia Drang Valley. The choppers had let him off south of Pleiku City on a western tributary of the Mung River. It was a simple recon mission; Willy Beal and two ARVN informants were to travel by boat and recon a village that was suspected of harboring NVA soldiers on their way through the country. A simple mission. Observe and report. A couple of days traveling along a lazy river, laying on the wet jungle mat and reporting movements in the village.

Willy was never sure just why, but from the time he left the briefing area in Pleiku he kept humming an old tune from the American civil war. Nervous energy will do that sometimes, and it just kept repeating over and over again in his head. “When Johnny comes marching home again, hoorah, hoorah. When Johnny comes marching home again, hoorah, hoorah. The men will cheer, the boys will shout, the ladies they will all turn out, and we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes marching home.”

Willy always thought *that's the way it will be when I go home. Lots of back slapping, hero worship and envy from those that didn't enlist and lots of round eye pussy for those of us that did.* It would be only three years later that he found out just how wrong he was. “When Johnny comes marching home again.....”

The ARVN's spent most of the first day moving the small band into a position south of the village where they could observe without being detected. They had established a perimeter which they booby-trapped with toe-poppers and

punji stakes then sat back in their blind to observe the village. After about two hours the two ARVN's left the blind to take a piss. Willy began to worry when he didn't hear them return. Five minutes became ten and he began to worry. He checked the trail back toward the river. The boat was gone and so were the ARVN's. "When Johnny comes marching home again....."

O.K., he thought. *What else is new.* He never believed in the fucking Chu Hoi Program anyway. You just don't take hardcore V.C. and turn them into loyal troops. *Chu fucking Hoi my ass*, he thought. Willy was not one to panic but he knew he had to get out of there. He wasn't sure whether his chickenshit Chu Hoi brothers had just got nervous and left, or had gone to the village for help. In any case, his survival instincts told him to get the hell out of there now! He went back to the blind and quickly began to gather up his gear. Willy took one last look through his binoculars and noticed increased activity in the village. *Motherfucking Chu Hoi's*, he thought.

He threw on his rucksack and started to turn around to head back toward the river. He figured that he'd rather face the blood sucking leeches, and cover his trail in the water than to try and hot-foot it across the jungle.

His nose picked up. He could smell the strong scent of Cosmoline grease. He knew it wasn't coming from his weapon. He had long since removed it with rifle cleaning solvents, but he knew his enemy, as often times as not, would leave it on their weapons to protect them from the ever-present wetness of the jungle. Willy heard the bolt snap into place from behind as the hidden enemy chambered a round into his AK-47. He panicked for just a second. "When Johnny comes marching home again..." Willy threw his rucksack to the ground, turned and fired his AR-15 in a curved path a foot off the jungle floor. He heard the familiar "pop-pop-pop" of an AK coming from his left. He turned and ran forward out the front of his blind, forgetting that they had booby-trapped the area. With razor

precision, a punji stake rammed through his jungle boot and out through the top of his foot. Willy hopped a few more feet on his good foot but soon fell over. Another punji ripped through his arm as he lay pinned to the jungle floor. As he looked up all he saw was the smiling faces of his captors, who stood over him prodding and kicking him. As he began to lose consciousness the familiar tune played in his ears, “When Johnny comes marching home again.....Johnny I hardly knew ya.”

As everyone knew, that had ever fought over there, there is only a small window of opportunity for escape after capture. That window is generally open only for a few hours, a couple of days at most. The first day the V.C. get your attention by beating the shit out of you and generally noting their disgust for Americans. It doesn't take long to figure out that they don't like you, and they never heard of the Geneva Convention.

The next day they began the interrogation. Interrogation by the V.C. gives new meaning to the word “CATTLEPROD”. Anyone that has ever had a generator hooked up to their nuts knows what Willy was going to have to endure if he wasn't repatriated soon. After the initial torture session, they would put you in a contraption called a tiger cage. The tiger cage was a three-foot square bamboo cage that the large Americans were forced to squat in while being transported to a prison site. Of course, the beatings and other sundry forms of physical and mental torture continued as they went along. Willy knew he would be displayed with full embarrassment at village after village. The villagers would be told that it was the Americans that killed their sons and raped their daughters. They would be whipped into a frenzy by the calculating V.C. interrogators. Then the villagers would be turned loose on the American prisoner. It wasn't pretty. It was degrading and ugly. Willy mentally prepared himself on that first day of his captivity for, what he knew would soon be, his destiny. “When Johnny comes marching home... Johnny I hardly knew ya.”

Willy moved through the door with no more fanfare than a breath of cool air on a summer's day. He moved left like a nocturnal chameleon, blending into his surroundings as he moved closer to his prey. He crouched, moving along the long length of the bar until only two tables separated him from the V.C. It was a game he was playing. See how close I can get before the V.C. knows I'm there. Shit not a chance. I'm invisible. The tune popped into his head again. Like a bad dream, he couldn't get rid of it. "When Johnny comes marching home again hurrah, hoorah."

There weren't any "hoorahs." That was the problem. Willy had been through hell and a grateful nation didn't want to be reminded of the unpopular war. Willy Beal was ostracized like thousands of returning vets. Made to feel somehow inferior because the U.S. didn't win. How many fights had he been in with veterans of "The Big One, WWII?" There was something fundamentally wrong with veterans fighting veterans. It took over twenty years for the wounds to heal but that didn't help the thousands of displaced, homeless men that now made up the majority of the street people. "Johnny, I hardly knew ya!"

Willy took a chance and slid into a chair at a table right behind the unsuspecting Nguyen. Boy, was this kid unaware. Willy got his wire out as Nguyen blew another stream of smoke toward the front window. Willy breathed the smoky air into his lungs and became one with it. He ducked as another car came down the block, it's headlights streaming into the restaurant. Willy popped up like a jack-in-the-box, his wire at the ready. "Johnny, I hardly knew ya," he shouted as he sprung on the unsuspecting V.C.

It was Preacher that found out about his capture first, then got the word to Daiwe. The Captain mobilized the entire team and put Jerry Andrews in charge of the mission to bring Willy back. Only two members of the team weren't there. Daiwe had to stay back and man the radio because Gunner was laid up in the dispensary with a roaring case of the clap. Pleiku radio gave the team a locate based on Willy's last radio transmission. He had notified the 'C' Team that the ARVN's had split on him and he was terminating the operation.

Two days later the Huey's swept the Ia Drang Valley and found Willy's last location. They lifted off and followed the trail until they were hovering over the village where Willy was now imprisoned. The V.C. hadn't had a chance to move him into the interior. They just had time to beat him, interrogate him, and kick the living shit out of him. The villagers had spit and pissed all over him as he lay in the cramped confines of his tiger cage. As the helicopters approached the V.C. went into hiding in the village. The gunships could see the tiger cage sitting in the middle of the compound. Jerry Andrews directed his gunship to strafe everything in the village and turn it into dust... everything except the tiger cage, then lands next to the cage. Five of our guys inside the chopper got out, and surrounded the gunship, their M-16's at the ready. Jerry jumped out and released the bamboo thong that held the cage door locked. He pulled Willy's crumpled frame up to him and hugged him tightly, tears streaming down his face, as he looked at the condition of his beaten comrade in arms. He gently put Willy into the chopper and the rest of the guys got back in and flew up into the sun where they hovered with the other gunship.

As they flew off toward the river the beat-beat-beat of the rotor blades drowned out Willy as he mumbled over and over again, "When Johnny comes marching home again."

“Flight leader this is Andrews. Fly up the river for a few minutes and let the V.C. come out of hiding then sweep back into that little hamlet again, and nuke it. “When Johnny comes marching home again.....”

Being captured by an armed and dangerous enemy is a real reality check. Willy was forever changed on that day. It made him a better soldier that's for sure, but what it did to his mind is a question better answered by his shrink. Many Army psychiatrists had tried, after that day, to get into Willy's head, but they all failed. It was soon after his capture that Willy's migraine headaches started in earnest. “Johnny, I hardly knew ya...”

He didn't have a headache now, but he knew it would eventually come. He had just a little voice in the back of his head, whistling his favorite tune, and directing him toward Nguyen's throat.

Nguyen suddenly felt the stillness of the room change. A chill breeze nipped at his exposed neck. He whipped himself around and stood up half expecting to see Gunner, but saw nothing. He drew in on his cigarette and blew a stream of smoke out in the direction of the bar. He was getting jumpy. Being alone in a dark room could always conjure up images of evil and foreboding if you let your mind take over your reason. *Sit back down. Relax*, he thought to himself. Nguyen turned his back on the table where Willy sat as if not being able to see him. He sat back down and faced away toward the door once more.

Willy had the magic going for him he could feel it. It was a mystical magical feeling of exuberance. The V.C. had looked right at him but never saw him. He was as invisible as a ninja in the night. They were at the same table together, yet he was totally invisible to the unseeing Nguyen. He also had his voices going for him and they had never let him down. Damn it felt good to be alive when you had this much going for you.

Willy snapped his wire out in front of him silently testing, for the last time, the metal of his killing tool. The handles felt as smooth as a baby's ass in the palms of his hands. His fingers caressed them lovingly as he moved the last two feet between him and the V.C.



Killing with a wire is not as easy as it looks. All kinds of things can go wrong if you're not careful and precise. The victim can sense you are behind him and get his hands on the wire, turn and face you, or you might not get the wire all the way around his neck. Worse yet, part of the wire might get hung up on his face or nose. That's when it got real ugly.

It was Jerry that showed Willy how to use the garrote. Jerry had learned the art from Sgt. Judd, during his martial arts training at Ft. Bragg, and felt compelled to pass on his skills to the other team members who were interested in learning another deadly art. Willy remembered that he and Gunner were the only ones to take Jerry up on his offer. Willy remembered the hours they spent practicing and the hundreds of Vietnamese squashes they killed before they became an expert at killing with a wire. Willy recalled fondly that the three of them were laughingly called the "Fruit Killers" by the rest of the team. Those were better days. That was then, and this was now.

Gunner couldn't sleep. Try as he might he just couldn't relax enough to fall asleep. More than once he was tempted to take to the streets and find some pussy, but his survival instincts were in overdrive. Pussy could wait until he was safely in Sydney Australia and all of Vinh Ho's assets had been transferred to his own

accounts. His flight would get him out of town during the elaborate funeral procession scheduled for nine in the morning. He planned on using the commotion of the funeral as a diversion to cover his departure from L.A. As far as paying his last respects to the Colonel, “Fuck him and the horse he rode in on.”

It was a matter of conscience that now kept his mind churning and his brain awake. Conscience and a migraine. He thought back over the years, back to when he was a member of A-255. The faces of Willy Beal, Preacher, Daiwe, Blaster, and Jerry popped into his head. They had some good times together. He always had a twinge of regret because Blaster and Daiwe were in the bunker, but it was something he had to do. It was his life or theirs, and he couldn't let his dead compatriot's memory cloud his instinct for survival.

Jerry was another matter. Jerry had gone from being a soldier, which he could respect, to a cop, which he couldn't. Cops of one sort or another had dogged his footsteps ever since he left Nam. He had a nose for cops that stood him well in the drug and smuggling trades. As for Jerry, he never really liked the prick, but he took care of that. He left the son-of-a-bitch for dead in that tiny dugout canoe and, was sure, that what was left of the body, was now rotting in small pieces at the base of the falls.

Gunner filled his tumbler with two fingers of scotch and tried to rest. The memories made it impossible, but the voices helped. Somewhere in the back of his head, his inner voice kept saying, “forget those guys, tomorrow you'll be rich.” *Easy for him to say*, thought Gunner.

Willy. Willy was another matter. Willy Beal was the motherfucker that had tormented him all these months. Gunner's eyes shot open and his breathing came in short deep bursts. His nostrils flared as his anger rose. Willy was some unfinished business that Gunner had meant to take care of. He thought about going out looking for the schmuck, but his inner voice told him to relax and forget William

Baines Beal. “Tomorrow you'll be rich and have all the pussy, and power, big money can buy,” Gunner smiled inwardly then reached into his shirt pocket and removed the piece of paper with the bank codes. He smiled as the series of numbers jumped off the paper and danced in his eyes. He folded it back up and put it back into his pocket. “Yeah. I can forget that little shit. There's pussy for the taking, and bigger fish to fry when I get to Australia.”

FORTY-FIVE

Willy knew that Jerry would eventually get out of the closet. He never intended to kill Jerry, after all, it was Jerry that led the assault on the V.C. prison camp that saved his life. Willy did need to slow him down enough, so he'd have time to take care of Gunner. He remembered through tear shrouded eyes the day of his return to his team. The V.C. had beat and tortured him unmercifully but he took everything they dished out and gave them nothing in return. He would never forget each and every man that risked their lives to save his, just as he would remember the one team member who was not there. For that, William Baines Beal never forgave Gunner McConnell.

Willy had dragged the body of the dead V.C. over in front of the door and tied him by the neck to the door knob. He knew that the dead weight of the body would drastically slow Jerry's efforts to free himself and give him the time he needed with his old nemesis.

Willy also knew that Gunner was still inside his room. He hoped he had heard the commotion and was hiding under his bed, but he knew better. He had never seen fear on Gunner's face, and he didn't think he would see it now. He hitched his garrote through the belt loop of his pants, he felt his trusty knife and began mounting the stairs again. Willy's head began to grind out that familiar tune as his heart pumped out fresh blood to his extremities. He was elated, free from fear, and close to terminating a chapter in his life that had taken him over twenty years to read. Each step was bringing him closer to his goal. Each step brought him closer to freeing himself from old demons that had refused to stay asleep after the war. A smile creased the face of William Baines Beal as he got ever closer to his

goal. It was a smile of release and he was happy. “This one's for you Blaster. You were right about the war, the politicians, and the homecoming. This one's for you,” he said as he mounted the last stair and walked toward Gunner's door. “When Johnny comes marching home again.....Ah, Gunner I hardly knew ya.”

Maybe he was just getting older, maybe he was just getting wiser, but Gunner couldn't shake the feeling that this might be his last day on the planet. He never felt quite like this before. He had been in a lot of tight places in his life, places that seemed on the surface, at least, to be tighter than the spot he now found himself in. He was pissed that he was scared, but there was no doubt in his mind that the fear had grabbed him by the nuts and was squeezing until he became a soprano. He would have to overcome it, he told himself. Suck it up, and kick some ass. What the fuck was he scared of anyway. Willy Beal was nothing more than a down and out Vietnam Vet. *Willy's nothing more than a boozier, who if left alone, would end up dead of hypothermia in some alley one night, and end up like that asshole Preacher*, he thought. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the remaining postcards. He tore them in half and tossed them onto the floor. Gunner took his nine MM off the safety and pulled the hammer back. He pointed it at the door and shouted, “Fuck you, Willy Beal. Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. Common Willy, Gunners waiting to give you a lesson in self-defense. I know you're out there you chickenshit son-of-a-bitch. All you got to do is walk through that door. I'm here. I'm waiting.”

“That's Gunner,” I said as I pushed hard against the closet door. I could hear him shouting from upstairs. I only got pieces of it, something about “Willy Beal, chickenshit son-of-a-bitch, I'm waiting.” It was Gunner alright. His vocabulary hadn't changed much since he was in service.

It was all coming down, and I had to get out of this closet. As hard as I pushed it only budged an inch. Willy had to have put a chair or a table up against it. I jammed my fingers into the one-inch crack and heaved against it with my shoulder. It moved slightly, but not far enough for me to get my body through. As I pushed against the door I was able to see out through the crack. My flickering Zippo provided just enough light for me to see. A pair of legs greeted my eyes. I pushed my face hard up against the door and noticed a hand. I pushed against the appendages with my own hand which I fished through the crack in the door. They didn't provide any resistance as I pushed. It was a dead body or someone that was as unconscious as a fighter whose face just ran into Mike Tyson's fist. I pushed again to make sure.

That fucking Willy, I thought. Gunner was right he is a chickenshit son-of-a-bitch. He went and tied a body to the door knob to keep me imprisoned in here. Enough was enough. It was time for me to make some real noise of my own. I only hoped that the cavalry was in place, because if they weren't, I was going to be doing an imitation of Custer at the Little Bighorn.

Gunner was right about one thing; Willy was just outside his door. Willy knew it would be tough to be invisible in this situation. He counted on the fear factor. He could perceptibly feel Gunners fear through the closed door. Fear hadn't been part of Willy's vocabulary or psyche since he saw the bright light and the tunnel while he floated painlessly above the floor of that jungle so long ago. He had no other choice now but a frontal assault on Gunners position. He had been involved in frontal assaults in Nam and done really well as the assaulter. The fact that he was still alive after three tours in southeast Asia was a testimony to his durability under fire. "If it's a frontal assault he wants, it's a frontal assault he gets," whispered Willy as he edged closer to the door.

Gunner checked his nine-millimeter for the third time as he crouched behind his bed. He removed the clip, checked the spring and slammed it back into the handle of the weapon. He looked over the barrel and drew a bead, down the front sight, on the center of the door. His heart was pounding to the coursing rhythm of the blood pumping through his system. The voices began to sound like a choir, more than one but less than a hundred. They were all shouting the same thing, “Kill that fucking Willy. Terminate the little bastard with extreme prejudice.”

A bead of sweat ran down Gunners' forehead and over his lip. He tasted the salt as he squinted hard on the center of the door. “I know you're out there, Willy. Come on in so we can talk about old times.”

Willy crouched low next to the door. *Sure*, he thought. *My old buddy Gunner wants to talk about the war.* Willy's inner voices warned him not to trust Gunner, a warning that he didn't need. He smiled to himself as he heard, Gunner's voice crack as he talked through the door. The voices told him that Gunner was scared, real scared. He liked it when fear replaced rational judgment. Anyone that put themselves in that situation was in a failure mode from the get-go. “I know I'm good at making myself invisible, but I probably won't be able to pass through a wood door or solid walls,” he whispered as he slinked to the center of the door and laid down on his back. He stared up at the brass door knob for just a second before he rapped hard on the center of the door.

The door blew out with explosive force as the first of fourteen rounds crashed through its center. Willy's hand was covered with blood. He wasn't quick enough to get it back down out of the line of fire and took a nine-millimeter round dead center through the palm of his hand. He cursed at himself as he looked at it

dripping blood onto his chest. Still, it was better than it could have been. He wasn't mortally wounded. He could still complete his mission. He listened closely and didn't hear the sounds of reloading coming from the room.

“Take that you son-of-a-bitch,” shouted Gunner as the last of his bullets blew out the center of the flimsy wood door. He stood up and advanced on the door. With the amount of firepower that he laid down he expected to look through the hole in the door and see Willy's body sprawled in the hallway. Gunner bent close to the door. His eyes moved back and forth across the hallway. Willy wasn't there. “Motherfucker,” he shouted and turned to get another clip from his bed stand.

Willy swung up from his position under the door, reached through the hole and opened it wide. Gunner heard the door open from behind him, but he was single-minded in reloading his weapon. Just then he felt a blow to the back of his neck and tumbled over the bed, dropping his gun and magazine onto the floor.

They stood facing each other from opposite sides of the bed. Willy leered at Gunner. “I'm here to take me some payback for what you did to those six guys in the bunker, Gunner.” Willy pulled his knife out from its sheath in the back of his pants. He held it up for Gunner to see. “You're going to look real funny without ears, Gunner. Just like you did to the V.C., except this time I'm the one doing the slicing and you're the slicee.”

“Willy you're crazy. What're you talking about? That was over twenty years ago,” said Gunner with just a twinge of fear in his voice.

“I know how long it's been. I counted every day and every hour ‘til I had you in the same room with me. It's what makes Sammy run, Gunner. After tonight, I've got nothing else to live for. You're the reason for my existence. Oh, by the way... you remember the jar you use to keep the ears in?”

“Don't tell me you were the one that stole it from me? I always figured Daiwe took it and got rid of it.” Gunner's fear was replaced with anger as he stared across the three-foot expanse of bed at Willy Beal; The thief, Willy Beal.

“No, it wasn't Daiwe. I took it and smuggled it out of the country with my personal gear. I looked at it every day for the last twenty-two years. I pictured your ears in it someday. No time like the present.”

Gunner stared back at Willy with the intensity of a middle linebacker waiting for the snap count. “I swore that if I ever found the guy that took my jar, I'd treat him just like any other thief is treated in southeast Asia. I'd cut his fucking hand off. Now that I know it's you, ... I plan on cutting your heart out along with it.” Gunner reached under his pillow with the swiftness of a striking cobra and produced his own blade. He waved it across the bed toward Willy. “Care to dance Mr. Beal?”

Madison needed desperately to talk with Captain Davis but had been given his marching orders. He could only sit in his position and watch, as Gunner stood silhouetted against the half-pulled window shade. He knew enough about this man from the briefing to justify taking him out. He could make the shot now and save everyone a lot of trouble later on, but he had his orders, and he waited.

Being a sharpshooter for a SWAT Team is a real head trip. How many targets had he shot in the head? Must have been hundreds, maybe thousands. Madison was trained to kill. Born to shoot. Only he knew the real truth. He had never killed anyone or taken a shot at a perp. All his kills were paper targets. *Maybe tonight was the night*, he thought as he lay in his concealed blind. *No more bullshit from the rest of the squad after they'd had a few beers. No more having to hear himself called the “Paper Executioner.”*

“Call me, Davis. Make contact so I can tell you how easy this will be. Call me dammit,” he said under his breath. Nothing. No static, no sound. Nothing. Just him sitting in this cold fucking alley waiting for some desk flying detective to tell him when he could shoot. He had felt the frustration many times before, but he was well trained. He knew his job. He bit back some bile that was in his throat and tried to relax. “The easiest shot of my life,” he mumbled, as he let the crosshairs of his night scope set on the head of Gunner McConnell.

