



# The Cowardly Lion

James Strauss



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# THE COWARDLY LION,

## Chapter I

The words “stay with us” burned their way into my consciousness, as I fought to comprehend the awful condition of my body and even my state of existence on the planet. The words kept repeating, as I tried to see through a distorted return of fuzzy imagery hot poker penetrating pain that rifled into the very center of my being. The pain came in waves that I rode as an unwilling surfer, each wave coming at me intolerably and inexorably, my stuttering breaths fighting to somehow survive by willing the troughs of those brutal waves to be something less than outrageous unsurvivable pain.

“Look at me, Junior, and stay with us,” a face said, the being’s beady eyes trying to bore their way into and then right through my own.

I tried to mouth the single word “okay” back, but nothing would come out. My breathing was only capable of riding the waves of red hot pain to bring me to seconds of minutely relieving but never-ending pain.

“Your hit bad through and through and you’ve got to fight it,” the moving mouth inches from my face said. “You are going out on the Huey right now. You’ll never make it waiting for the big bird.”

Some sort of consciousness, that thinking now foreign to me as the pain attempted to occupy every shred of every bit of any kind of rational thoughts I might otherwise have. I knew I was hit. I'd seen the NVA soldier rise from his spider hole not ten feet from my position. I'd been moving to the center of the company in order to figure out what so much fire had seemed to be concentrated and coming from there when all the company Marines were stationed in a great perimeter set up to defend against outside intrusion and attack.

In that instant, when the soldier had opened up with his AK-47, I knew the enemy was coming out of the earth. They'd been waiting, after digging like fiends to prepare, since we'd sheltered down in the same position prior to coming down the face of the wall almost a month before, and they'd been ready. The fire I was trying to find the source of was their fire, as they killed my Marines from the rear while the unit fought against what it believed was fire coming in from outside the perimeter.

The yellow and white blasts from the AK had been like a string of Christmas tree lights coming at me, much slower than bullets were supposed to go. I'd turned a tiny bit to begin attempting to evade the string, but I'd only made that turn with my upper body before running out of time. The bullets hit my side and then were gone. The soldier disappeared to somewhere as I went down, not knocked down like I'd seen in the movies or even over backward, but slowly,

like a damaged building collapsing from the bottom up.

"I know the pain's bad, really bad," the small moving mouth with beady black eyes that wouldn't leave my own said, "but I can't give you morphine. Your system will simply shut down and let you die. The pain's keeping you alive. We're going to have you on the chopper and out of here in minutes."

I thought of the morphine in my pocket, the pocket that still held the letter home to my wife I hadn't been able to get aboard any helicopter since coming to the end of the valley. As the face moved back and away from my shortened visual field of view I managed to get one hoarsely whispered word out. I had to speak. I had to get the face to understand and then take action. I could not access the morphine the face would not give me without being able to use both hands and in my right hand, I held tightly, uncontrollably to something that prevented that hand's use for anything other than what it was doing. I had to have the morphine and I didn't care one whit about whether I died or not. I could not take the pain. I would not take the pain.

"Grenade," I hissed across the short distance to the face.

The Marine stopped his retreat and leaned back down.

"Grenade?" he asked, his wetly smooth forehead furrowed with a deep frown.

"Right hand," I got out, trying to gesture by nodding my head to the side and down toward my

uncontrollably clutching hand, but my head would not move, any more than my hand could or would let go of the M33 grenade I'd pulled out of my right front pocket as I'd gone down from the effect of the bullets striking my torso. Once the hits registered right into the central core of my being, however, my ability to do anything other than pull and discard the pin had been taken from me.

The face disappeared and I went back to trying to ride the scorching awful waves radiating into and out of my shattered body. I was hemmed in. The bullets had to have gone in on one side of my torso and out the other because the waves of pain came from those sides into my interior and then seemed to reflect and bounce back to those sides. Time after time, with milliseconds between them.

"Jesus Christ," a voice I recognized but could not place breathed out. "The pin's pulled. Easy, easy, use the K-Bar to pry his fingers loose. He's not going to give a damn about losing fingers at this point."

I wanted to shout that I did give damn, that I wanted all my fingers, but I couldn't say anything as the waves stole my voice, my breath, and even most of my ability to see.

I knew my hand hurt but also knew that the hurt there didn't matter one bit. The waves racking their way back and forth through my body like those of a shaken bottle of coke absorbed that hurt like it was a remote matter too inconsequential to be anything more than noticed in a minor way.

"Fire in the hole," a loud voice screamed.



Through the waves of white-hot heated pain, I felt and heard a loud explosion. I couldn't remember hearing the explosions that had to have been occurring when the bullets came out of the AK and on into me, but the sound of the grenade going off was unmistakable.

The face leaned back in for a few seconds, "Got any more surprises, Junior? By God, you were a piece of work in your time," and then was gone.

My ears rang, but I was used to that.

The face's words; "You were a piece of work in your time," ate their way through the pain, and on into some still open recess of my fractured mind. My time was over? I felt a familiar, yet alien, bolt of fear rush its way to the top of my roiling and shattered being.

The face was gone, the explosion far back in my somehow time-slowed existence. I was alone.

I worked my left hand over and down with impossible effort, the surging power of its goal overcoming iron strength of attempted life-stopping power of the surf-riding, nearly overwhelming, force of the pain.

The morphine. I clutched the small box containing the styrettes. The face had said that administering morphine would kill me.

I felt the plastic bag next to the morphine box, as I worked to get the box out of my wet pocket with difficulty. I wanted my letter to home. I could not die. What would my wife and new daughter do without me? There was no money on her side of the family and my side of the family wasn't likely to share a thin

dime. My wife had worked three times in her life during college to help pay tuition. Once, in a potato factory, once in a pet store and once as a recess director at a summer park. She had done remarkably well at those foundational and terrible paying jobs. There was little hope that she might find something to support herself and our daughter without me. I could not die, but I could not take the pain. It was simply too awful, and, in spite of what the face had said, I knew in what was left of my rationality that the morphine was very likely the only thing that might keep me alive.

I fumbled the package out, shredding the cardboard box as I did so while bringing my freed-up right hand over atop my agonized torso to grasp the tiny styrette. I breathed, and then breathed deeply again to get to a near-instantly passing trough between the giant waves of unbearable pain. I flicked the plastic cover off the top of the tube and then, as gently as my forced and shaking fingers could do it, I got the tiny metal stopper out of the end of the needle, wondering at the same time about the fingers I couldn't see that had to still be there if I was able to do what I was doing.

I punched the needle of the tube into my stomach. There was no way I could bend my torso to get the drug into my thigh. I knew from long experience with the company in combat that one syrette wasn't going to be enough. I pawed with my left hand and found another stuck in the mud covering my stomach. I punched a second syrette into nearly

the same place the first one had gone. I knew that three syrettes were death for someone of my size. If I was to die from taking the two then it was a death meant to be. I would not do the three. My letter home to my wife still had to be posted, and I was duty-bound to get it in the mail. She, and my daughter, were all I had to hold onto and I wasn't about to let them go.

The waves of fire-hardened pain began to come down from their vaulting heights as the morphine began to do its job. My breathing began to change from the sucked and vacated packets of spewing jungle air it had been to a level where my torso no longer beat itself up and down against the jungle floor.

The run across whatever compound the chopper had landed on was harder than the bumpy life-threatening ride from the edge of the A Shau. I couldn't remember where on the base any medical facility was located, but I'd only breezed right on through, thanks to my liping off to the division general officer only a month before. I saw the lights. Thousands of lights, and then I heard jet engines, many of them, all spooling up and getting ready for a pre-dawn liftoff. I realized I wasn't in Ah Hoa. The chopper had taken the extra risk of bringing me straight into the First Medical Battalion. I was in Da Nang. If I was to receive care then that trauma center would be about the best I, or anyone else, could get.

"Get him to triage," a female voice yelled.

"There's no triage because there are no other patients," a man's voice overpowered hers. "Get him

straight to surgery, no prep except blood, lots of blood".

I felt as good as I could under the circumstance. I would only find out later triage was the place where patients were evaluated to see who might be the best candidates to survive because surgeons were very limited in number and on time.

"That's a great Colt you're wearing there, pardner," one of the Marines dragging my poncho said. "Mind if I help myself?"

I couldn't frame a reply. I felt my .45 lifted from the holster, surprised that it was still there. I had no use for any kind of gun, and I hoped then and there that I never would.

"What about that watch?" another Marine asked, glancing down. "Wow, who is this guy, anyway. A great Colt and even greater watch. He won't need it where he's going."

I felt my watch being stripped away. I wanted the watch. Where was I going that I wouldn't need a watch? But, once again, I could not get any words out.

A face appeared very close to my own, big sparkling eyes like those of Nguyen shining down upon me. It wasn't Nguyen. I hadn't seen him get off the chopper and instantly regretted not even thinking about him. Was he hit too, but too tough to show it? No, the man had said that there were no other patients. Not yet, I thought. If Nguyen and I had made it then there had to be others and they might be in as bad a shape as I was in, or maybe not so bad.

Suddenly, I wanted to be in surgery as quickly as possible. I didn't know what triage meant but I wasn't stupid either. I wanted to be in surgery, but all I got was I.V.s being run into both my arms, my right thigh, and then the left side of my neck. I'd never heard of anyone getting four I.V.s at the same time. And then there was the face, whispering to me.

I listened closely to the whispering coming out of the mouth of the person whose face was way too close to my own: "Through the holy mysteries of our redemption, may almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and in the life to come. May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy."

I was receiving the last rites, and the whispering face belonged to a Catholic priest.

Terror all but overcame me as a clear plastic mask replaced the priest's face. The last rites, administered to those that were dying but not dead yet. Gas pumped into the mask, and I tried to fight the numbing feel of it. I didn't want to die. I had to get home. I had a letter to my wife in my pocket and that had to be mailed. I wasn't done yet. And then everything went away. Not blackness but simply lost foggy awareness until that blackness finally crept in.

My first awareness of consciousness was light. Bright light. Too bright. I gagged, which is the only sound I could make. I wanted anyone there to turn down the lights.

"I'm Doctor North, your surgeon", a deep voice from nearby said.

The man sounded exactly like Brother John from the Armed Forces Radio Network.

I slanted my eyes back and forth, unable to move my head which was taped down.

I saw him and was surprised. He was black. He had a pencil mustache and very short black hair, with some gray in it.

“We’re shipping you out of here to Yokosuka, Japan. You’ll get the best care there. You have a really good chance of making it. You have, what we call here, a survivor’s body. You should have died before you got here. You lost too much blood to live, but here you are. I did multiple resections and knitted the bone of your hip back together. Any more than that is going to have to wait for other surgeons along the way. Your file...someone wrote Junior next to your name. I marked that out with a magic marker. There’s no reason for any of this to follow you. You need medical help, not criticism.”

I had not been that kind to my black Marines. I’d been close to Zippo but always distant from Sugar Daddy and the rest of my black Marines. I’d killed some before things had settled down. Here was a black surgeon saving my life. I wondered about the priest and if they were somehow linked. Would God forgive me that easily from the punishments I most justly deserved? Would the prayer of the priest to release me from all punishments in this life have a full effect?

“This will get you through, for most of the flight,” a female voice said, only her hands visible enough for me to see. She injected something into one of my I.V. tubes.

I felt the gentle tugging grace of morphine, its effect so sinuously warm yet apparent in every way. My mind wandered almost immediately. What was going to get me through the rest of the five- or six-hour plane trip to Japan? But the morphine won all battles over such interior and groundless arguments. I went under again, although I was desperate to stay awake. Every time I went to sleep I just knew I had a really great chance of never waking up.

“Letter in my pocket to my wife, “ I got out to the injecting nurse. I tried to look at where my watch was supposed to be. I really wanted that watch.

“Well, okay, I’ll see to that,” the nurse replied, and then she was gone and everything else went with her.

I awoke again and listened intently for the sound of whirling turbines, but there was nothing.

A woman with a chart stood over me, as I was wheeled along. I wondered why hospitals didn’t put some sort of scenery on the ceilings in the hallways, as it was about all patients, like me, on gurneys, got to see. The woman spoke.

“We don’t get many doctors in here, especially not Air Force doctors.”

“Okay,” was all I could think to say.

“Where’d he come out of?” a male voice nearby asked.

“Da Nang,” it says here, originally.

“Holy crap, did you read this?” the woman said, obviously passing something I couldn't see to the man, who I couldn't quite make out either although he had to be standing very near to the gurney I'd never been offloaded from.

“He's not medical corps at all,” the man said, awe in his voice. “The file's stamped ‘M.C.’ but it means the Marine Corps, not medical corps. This guy is a Marine Officer fresh out of combat. We stabilize and ship to Yokosuka immediately, or immediately as we can. He's just had surgery and no doubt needs more.”

“How far?” I finally croaked out, fearing the two medical personnel were about to leave.

“Thirty-Three miles,” the woman said.

“About an hour,” the man followed up.

“Morphine?” I tried to ask, but the word came out all broken and hushed.

“You better believe it,” the woman said. “It's taken about half an hour to arrange a Jeep to get you there. I'll medicate when you're ready to go. You are on 4 Q.H. so that'll be a little bit short of the rule but what the hell, it wasn't your mistake so why should you pay?”

They left and I laid there, trying not to see a nearby patient who was missing half his face. His one good eye kept looking at and into me, like somehow, I was to blame for his awful condition. What, in combat, I wondered, could take off half, but not all, of a person's face, and how would that happen to



someone in the Air Force? The fact that the man might have been flying an airplane that got hit only occurred to me when I was in the Jeep, flying across a crummy half-decayed highway toward the Naval Hospital that was supposed to take care of whatever was left of me.

The ride wasn't that bad. My gurney was strapped from the front of the Jeep's lowered windshield to the rear seat. The gurney was angled up in the rear where my head was. I could see everything along the highway as we traveled, and with a fresh hit of the morphine, the trip, taking less than an hour, wasn't bad at all.

I was on 4 Q.H. which meant that I got a 10-milligram shot of morphine every four hours. The first hour was an almost human experience. The second hour was an hour of uneasy endurance. The third hour was an hour of harsh endurance and the last hour could only be tolerated by a count-down, minute by minute, second by second until another shot would be administered. The medical staffs of all the trauma hospitals were very sensitive to getting that shot to the patients on nearly the very second, they were prescribed for. They'd learned early on in the war that the screaming that began when that fifth hour began wasn't worth putting up with.

Yokosuka was a sprawling complex of one-story buildings, connected by narrow halls. The place looked, as I was driven slowly inside on one of the many nearly impassably narrow roads, like a warehouse series of dormitories for chickens. There

were buildings all over the American Midwest used for exactly that purpose. The buildings were all made of wood with shake roofs. The wood was poorly painted in worn cream colors, while the window trim and doors were bright blue. One of the doors ahead opened up and the Jeep stopped.

“That’s our dirty surgery?” a man holding a file said.

I recognized the file that had accompanied me during my stay at Tachikawa Air Force Base, from where I'd departed half an hour ago by rapid Jeep travel.

I wondered what ‘dirty surgery’ meant but there was no time or anyone to ask about it as what little communication ability I had had been taken away by the generous shot of morphine the woman had administered, as promised, just before I left. The personnel at the Air Force Base had been polite, cheerful, and caring, but it had also been obvious that they wanted nothing to do with a combat Marine Officer just out of the valley.

I was not so gently shuffled off the Jeep mounted gurney onto a more portable model with rails and wheels, before being wheeled in through the blue door. From there it was a brief run down a hallway, passing closed door after closed door behind which I presumed other patients lay.

“X-ray, and then over to cardiac,” a male voice said. “If his hearts no good then this is an exercise in futility. He needs a room in dirty surgery and then more antibiotics and morphine. Those bullets took

parts of his uniform and whatever else was laying around the jungle area, into the interior of his body. They can't have found them all at First Med. The next big fight is going to be the infection if we make it that far."

Music came from somewhere, and all I could do was think of Fessman, and his little bitty radio. How much it meant to him to turn it on down in the valley, and finally also coming to understand that he was playing it many times for me.

The song was *Never My Love*, a song that had played on the system that was part of the Basic School back so seemingly long ago. *Never My Love*, the lyrics played, and they had no meaning in my life as I was being wheeled into a surgery situation I wasn't likely to survive. "*What makes you think love will end*

*When you know that my whole life depends on you (on you)...never my love, never my love.*"

But did those words have meaning, really? My wife, my daughter, my existence on the earth. "*Never my love.*" There was no plan to assign the words to, as I had so often done down in the valley. There was no 'never my love' mission, and there was no audience of very concerned and worried Marines to play to. Fessman's music reached inside me, and I knew, at that moment, that the men, as he had so demonstrated, would never leave my consciousness or attention ever again. The litany of those gone rang through me like bells, syncopated with the passage of the lights on the ceiling below which I traveled. Sugar

Daddy, the Gunny, Jurgens and so many more, apparently, or in reality, all dead and gone. I only knew Nguyen to be alive and I clung to that, although it wasn't likely I'd ever see or hear from him again. A face appeared in front of my own, as I traveled the light segmented road to surgery. The face seemed too close and too intent. The man's mouth was speaking words but I could not understand them. I listened as closely as I could.

"Through this holy unction may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins or faults thou hast committed," the man said, his eyes peering intently into my own. And then it hit me, and the fear that had been eased back, along with much of the pain, by the morphine came crashing back into the center of my being.

The man saying the words was a Catholic priest. He was administering the last rites to me, and not just any last rites, but the one's to be delivered to anyone about to die at any moment.

I entered the surgical room and the priest was brushed away. I had nowhere to take my awful fear of dying. A clear plastic mask was attached to my face and the world around me began to whirl.

*"You ask me if there'll come a time when I grow tired of you,"* the words from the Association song played, as I went into unconsciousness. I tried to hang on, to interpret the words and their meaning but it was too late. I was gone.

## Chapter II

I awoke in bits and pieces. I blinked my eyes up at the ceiling, which was made of some strange greenish plaster, with light bulbs swinging slightly from wires hanging vertically down. I realized, hazily, that I was in some sort of hard-roofed tent. I tried to move my head but something was holding it down. I raised my right hand with difficulty, as I.V. tubes were heavily taped to most of my arm. I felt my neck. An I.V. was attached under the side of my jaw.

A man's face appeared from my left side, centering itself over my own, about four inches from me. I wanted to back up or sink lower in the slanted bed but I could not move at all.

"Surgery went well but it's going to be a long hard road from here," the man said, his brown eyes remaining steady and unblinking.

"Doctor?" I managed to get out.

"Hardly," the face said. "I'm your corpsman, your orderly, letter-writer, bathroom assistant, and plenty more."

I realized that the man's face was way too young to be that of a doctor.

"You a corporal?" I asked, not knowing why I asked.

"Lance," the boy said.

"I had a corporal once," I breathed out, the enormity of Fessman's death rushing like a load of

rocks falling from the ceiling. I grimaced, but could only shut my eyes. I wasn't crying. Fessman deserved tears but I had none. I felt bad about that too.

"Sorry," I breathed out.

"That's okay," the Lance Corporal said. "You're in a lot of pain. You've got an hour to go but I can push it to q 3h every once in awhile if you're in a bad spot."

I couldn't understand how a Lance Corporal Corpsman could order or 'push' anything but knew I'd once more entered a world where I was an FNG all over again.

"Okay," I replied, not knowing what else to say. I fought Fessman out of my mind, feeling guilty about that too. The Lance Corporal had said he was a letter-writer, and that had impacted on me. I was strapped down with I.V. tubes in both arms, still getting blood and then clear stuff too. I could not write home and there was no way to call either. My wife was going to need an accurate report of my situation and condition, as well as knowing where I was, as quickly as she could get it. My letters home had not been accurate, for the most part, and neither had most of our reports sent to the rear from the field. The letter I needed to write, or have the Lance Corporal write, would have to be accurate, understandable, and sent right away. I had no faith in whatever communications my wife would be receiving from the Marine Corps. My parents also deserved a letter.

"What's your name?" I whispered to the corporal, my strength seeming to ebb a bit.

“Shoot,” the corporal replied, finally pulling himself back from the side of my bed to the point where I couldn’t see him again. “I’m from Little Chute in Wisconsin, so everyone calls me Chute, but I’m not little.”

“No, of course not,” I got out.

“That’s my nickname, spelled like shooting a rifle like you’re Junior. Ranks don’t work really well in this kind of place.”

“How’d you know my nickname?” I asked, some strength returning at the mention of my own name, in light of how damaged I was in an unknown position and situation.

“The doctor blotted that off my file.”

“Word travels fast in this place. I don’t know how. It’s all English inside and all Japanese on the outside...and the Japanese don’t particularly like us here.”

There was a silence after that. I realized, after a short time, that the corporal was gone. For some reason, I didn’t want to be alone to go through the next terrible last hour, while the morphine was fast wearing off. I could do it by breathing and watching the huge clock, mounted up on the wall with a big loud-ticking second hand. I could count seconds. It took six seconds for me to breathe in and out. I figured that out right away. Ten breaths a minute. Six hundred breaths to the next morphine shot. I could do it.

“This is Kathy, your nurse,” Shoot’s voice spoke from nearby, his presence too far to the side to allow me to see him, or Kathy, however.

Kathy appeared suddenly, at my right side. She had long brown hair I saw right away, wore no cap, but was dressed in white like nurses were supposed to be. Her eyes smiled and sparkled. I tried to smile back but I had no tears, and now no smiles in me.

“Nurse Kathy?” I asked.

“Just Kathy will do fine,” she replied, grasping the I.V. tube running into my right wrist, and quickly injecting something into it.

“Shoot says you’re in a bad way,” Kathy said, disposing of a syringe, it making a slight clang as it fell into a metal container of some sort on the floor. “Your chart says you are dead, so I guess an extra shot, here or there, isn’t going to affect that condition. I’ll be seeing you.”

Kathy walked away, her shoes making a whispery sound on what I presumed was a bare concrete floor.

“You’ll get used to her,” Shoot said.

“Does the chart really say that?” I asked, tentatively.

“So, I guess there’s no wonder why they call you Junior, huh?” Shoot replied.

I didn’t understand the corporal’s answer but caught the sarcasm in his voice as he’d said the words, intimating that I was too dumb to understand him.

The morphine hit me and the room spun once before



centering itself. The pain flowed out of me like something traveling fast down a flooded river. I stopped counting my breaths and closed my eyes. Whatever Kathy had hit me with was powerful, indeed.

"I'm here whenever you need me," Shoot said, his voice seeming to come up from the floor on my left side, but nothing of his body was visible.

"Why are you staying?" I asked, without opening my eyes. I knew I was going out and I was so relieved. I also knew if I did not go out then I wasn't going to be making much sense in short order.

"I'll always be here, as long as you're here," the corporal said. "I sleep on a cot through that door over there under the clock. I sleep with the door open in case you need me, courtesy of the United States Navy. You get your own corpsman and a private room and a television. Feel special. The television is all in Japanese though. The good news is that they don't have restrictions about having naked women on them."

"Letter home, wife," I got out. "Letter home, wife," I said again, putting all the energy I had left into it while wondering if all corporals in the Marine Corps were as wonderful as Fessman, and now Shoot.

"Got you," the corporal said. "You want me to write it and get it off toot sweet, or do you want to wait until you're better?"

I had no energy left to speak. I tried to wave my left fingers at him but realized they were all bandaged. I'd forgotten about the damage to my hand.

"I'll write the truth if you want it, about where you are, what they've done to you, and the damage and prospects for your survival. I'll give her the address here and the Captain's personal address in case she wants to hear from the commander of the facility. I've done this before. I just need her address since your file only has your parent's address as your home of record."

"Pocket," I squeezed out, "parents too." I'd pre-addressed a couple of envelopes I had tucked into my trouser pocket.

I passed out, being almost certain, however, that my trousers had gone the way of my watch and my .45.

I awoke again, and it was light. I knew I had awakened several times in the night because I had vague memories of someone I presumed to be Shoot hovering over me before I'd go under again.

An older woman walked from the bottom of the bed to my left side, before stopping to lower my chart and looking down at me. She wore a black dress and her heels clicked, which meant that she wasn't wearing a nurse's shoes.

"I'm Barbara, and I'm a volunteer, ostensibly with the Red Cross but actually with anybody who wants me," she said, sounding like one of the Maryknoll nuns I'd spent most of elementary and high school learning under, and being totally dominated by.

"Yes," I whispered back, my mouth awful tasting and dry.

'You're in a world of hurt and on a spinning planet of trouble, is what it says here. They're working away on all this medical stuff but there's other junk you need, no doubt. That's my department." She bent down and looked at me closely for the first time.

"Good God, you still have the mud of that Vietnam jungle in your hair," she said, more to herself than me. "Shoot!" she yelled.

I heard running feet.

"Yes, ma'am," Shoot replied from very close, although I couldn't see him.

"I'm no ma'am to you," Barbara said, very forcefully.

"Yes, ma'am," Shoot said, although there seemed to be a bit of fear in his tone.

I thought of Fessman again. It would be just like him to reply the same way, or it would have been, I corrected myself.

"Ice, since he's NPO. Nothing by mouth but he can suck on ice. Toothpaste and brush, and get one of those nurses to wash his hair. And turn on the television. Get some damned life in this awful cloister of a room. And why the hell is he here? Look at this chart. He should be in ICU, like right now. Condition critical, prognosis poor, and he's abandoned in some little hole like this? Where's the damned surgical team? Suzuki's here today. He needs to be on this. Find them and report back, like yesterday."

I'd wanted to ask for a pain shot, but the manner and force of her delivery had taken me completely by surprise.

Barbara stepped to the end of my bed, replaced the medical chart, and walked out of the room, her heels clicking loudly, yelling over her shoulder: "I'll be back in ten minutes and things better have changed by then."

Shoot appeared at my side, his face white, staring at the still swinging door Barbara had exited through.

"I need a shot," I finally said, "what's the countdown?"

"Kathy will be on her way right now, don't worry," Shoot replied.

"Who is that woman?" I asked, my breath easing as I knew the pain shot had to be on the way.

"She's a volunteer," Shoot said, softly.

"Why does it seem like she's a lot more than that?" I asked, "for sure, you're a bit scared of her. I think I'm even scared of her."

"She's also the Captain's wife," Shoot replied.

"The Captain who runs this whole hospital complex."

"Why did she say I should be in Intensive Care, and why aren't I if I should be?" I asked, as Kathy entered the room, walked to my opposite side from where Shoot stood, and gently inserted a needle into one of my I.V. lines.

"I hear they are moving you," she said, "about damned time. The evaluation team is on the way to check you out. Our dirty surgery I.C.U. only holds three patients and it was full, but not anymore."

"Barbara throw somebody out on the lawn?"

Shoot asked, a bite to his tone as he said the words.

“Shipped home,” Kathy said, tossing the syringe and moving toward the open door. “I’ll be back to arrange the move once they approve you. The good news is that you’ll be right between Lewis Puller and Masters.”

“I’ve got to get the ice, the toothpaste and I’ll wash your hair myself when you get down to I.C.U.”

“Shipped home?” I asked the corporal.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice telling me what I really didn’t want to hear. The patient wasn’t being shipped in a seat.

“Who are Puller and Masters?” I asked, as Shoot headed for the door.

“Chesty Puller’s, and General Master’s sons,” he said, over his shoulder as he went.

Kathy walked into the room.

“The surgical team is dropping by on rounds to determine your status for the I.C.U. bed. That you are conscious and handling the drugs so well is a big plus. I’ll crank you up to a more vertical position.” She approached the bottom of the bed, bent down, and began working a crank.

My upper body bent, as the upper half of the bed slanted up more vertically. An alarm went off.

“What the hell?” Kathy said, standing before me. I noticed right away that I could not blink or move anything at all.

“Crank him down,” Kathy yelled, running for the door. “We need a crash cart and the duty doctor on this wing. We’ve lost him.”

I watched Shoot crank, his eyes staring into my own until the angle was such that I was staring at the ceiling once again.

Kathy ran back into the room pushing a narrow blue cart to the side of the bed, and then going to work to untangle wires and whatever else was on top of the cart. A doctor, his stethoscope extended in his right hand, leaned over and pushed the cold rubber end of it onto my chest.

"Nothing," he said, to my amazement. He pulled back a bit from the bed and plopped his scope onto my bare opened stomach incision. "Clear" he yelled, turning slightly so Kathy could place a metallic paddle in each of his hands.

"Set for 300 joules," Kathy said.

The doctor, named Peter, if the nametag on his left breast was a true indication, pressed the paddles to my chest.

Suddenly, my whole body jumped and it felt like a huge baseball bat had struck me squarely in the center of my chest. I gasped once, and then again, only realizing that I had not been breathing at all for the longest time. The pain came rushing in as the doctor stepped back.

"Got him, normal sinus rhythm," he said, handing the paddles back to Kathy.

"Leave the cart, but let them know at the desk where it is, just in case we lose him again before we ship. And forget about qualifying for I.C.U. Down there he goes, on my orders, stat. The surgical review's canceled."

I waited, breathing in and out lightly and slowly, trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened. It wasn't possible. I knew Kathy and the doctor were not wrong or making things up. The pain had been gone completely for the first time since I had been hit. I hadn't been breathing. I couldn't move and my eyes would not blink. I'd been dead, with no blood flow going to my brain. It was not possible to be conscious under such circumstances, I knew, but I had been.

Moments went by, the pain once again inside my very center, threatening to absorb all thought of anything but getting through.

"You're being transported, and the boards are old and rough in all the halls here," Kathy said, unlocking the bed's brakes, one wheel after another. She moved the bed, to make sure it was portable, then walked around to join Shoot at my left side. She held out one hand toward the corporal.

"This is a bonus shot to get you down there," she said, pulling the plastic tip off the syringe Shoot had handed her.

She punched it lightly into the plastic tube of my left arm I.V. "Not much, but it'll have to do. You can't take much after the arrest."

"We're not supposed to, but I'm going to have another corpsman take the crash cart with us, just in case something happens along the way. We've got plenty of stuff down there but you're pretty unstable just now, I'm going to presume."

Whatever was in the shot hit me hard. I wondered if it was because of the heart incident. For some reason, I had not been afraid of dying, and I was not now, which was uncommon. Down in the A Shau, I'd been afraid almost every moment of every day and night, in some way or another, but the pain and misery of my life there had been surface and fleeting compared to what I was having now. I'd somehow made a trade, fair or unfair, of terror for pain. Maybe I couldn't survive the two occurring together so my mind was trying to protect me. I realized after the paddles had hit me, that I had much less understanding of the world and what went on in it, than I'd thought.

Shoot left and came back almost immediately with another corpsman. I could only tell by assumption and sound, as I was flat on my back once again. Kathy pushed my bed, while Shoot guided it from the foot. I was moved out the door and then down the hall, the bed bouncing fairly wildly, as Kathy had told me it would, as we raced along, I.V. bags swinging from three metal stalks that bent slightly, back and forth against the movement.

"I was awake," I forced out, up to Kathy's upside-down face leaning over me as she pushed the bed.

"What?" She asked back.

"I was awake while you and the doctor were working on me," I said.

"Not possible," Kathy replied. "It's the drugs. You were coded out. No heartbeat, no EKG, no nothing. You were gone for more than a minute, although not



long enough to be otherwise affected, we hope.”  
“

You told the doctor that you were setting that machine for 300 joules, whatever those are,” I said.

“That’s a standard-setting for defibrillation cardiac restart,” Kathy replied.

“The doctor’s name,” I gasped up toward her. “The doctor had never been in to see me. He was from somewhere else in the hospital.”

“Yes?” Kathy said, “that’s true, but just because you never saw him before isn’t exactly special.”

“His name is Peter,” I whispered, knowing that the shot she’d given me was fast taking away my ability to talk.

“Yes, that’s true,” Kathy replied.

“How would I know?” I asked.

“How would you know?” she asked back.

“Because it was on the nametag he was wearing on his right breast when he leaned over me with the paddles.”

The bed suddenly stopped moving, with a jolt.

“What did you say?” Kathy asked, her face now only inches from my own.

“I read his nametag,” I repeated.

“Shoot?” Kathy asked, “Was Doctor Peter wearing his nametag?”

“He always wears his nametag,” Shoot replied.

“He loves his nametag. He’s proud of his name, being the ‘rock’ and all that from in the Bible.

“Damn,” Kathy breathed out, looking back down at me. “There’s something special about you, but I’m

damned if I know what it is. Let's see if we can save what's left of your life."

She bent into the top of the bed and began pushing more powerfully than she had before.

I watched the 'highway line' lights flick by overhead, as the bed began to move much faster than it had before.

# Chapter III

I.C.U. was nothing more or less than a long single room with three beds in it. There were no windows, no television set, but, I noted as I was wheeled in, there was the ubiquitous large clock mounted on the wall over the doubled doors that had split down the center to allow my bed through. The clock ticked loud enough to hear across the room and its big second hand clicked from one second to the next. The middle bed was missing so I knew I wouldn't have to be transferred from bed to bed, an agonizing process.

Corporal Shoot approached the side of my bed and fussed with some of the tubing still running out from both my wrists and my neck. At some point in my hazy drug state, only truly interrupted by the hour or hour and a half when the pain brought frightful clarity back into my life until the morphine deadened it again, they'd removed the I.V. that had been running in my thigh. I could move my legs again, as those restraints had been taken off, as well. Although not painful, the wrist restraints were terribly uncomfortable because I couldn't move my torso almost at all, and just laying frozen in the same position, angled a little higher or

lower by the cranking of the bed, didn't quite give me any sense of freedom at all.

Shoot stuck a chunk of ice into my mouth without asking me if I needed it. "The cottonmouth thing is a function of the opiates in your system," he said when he saw my frown, "and you've got a load of that circulating around."

"Letter," I got out, around the chunk of ice, which I had to attempt to manipulate around my mouth without using my hands.

"Both posted," Shoot replied with a smile. He then quoted me about what he'd written in each letter. "I made copies of both letters but you can't read right now, anyway. Kathy's got one of those Xerox 913 things at the nurse's station."

I breathed in and out deeply, not yet needing a shot, and felt some relief from the worry I was occasionally experiencing over my situation. The fact that it did not seem that anyone really knew whether I would live or die bothered me.

If I died, then what would my new wife and even newer daughter do. Neither of us had come from wealthy families. There were no reserves, no calling the parents or any of that if the money I was earning dried up completely.

"My Marines," I breathed out, trying to understand why there was no place to go to find out what had happened to everyone I'd left behind.

"You have to think about you for the time being," Shoot said, "and I have to go. I'm not an I.C.U. corpsman, so I'll see you again when they kick you

back onto the floor. You'll get more attention in here than I could give you anyway."

Shoot walked out through the double swinging doors, leaving them gently waving as if saying goodbye, he hadn't spoken. I wondered whether hellos and goodbyes might ever return in my life. There were no real social introductions or goodbyes in combat, and they didn't seem to exist in the hospital where I'd ended up either. People just came and went. As I turned my thoughts to Kathy, she walked through the doors.

Kathy walked over to check out my I.V. solutions, then turned on a tiny flashlight to look into each of my eyes. She didn't say hello, so I didn't either.

"Your condition is critical, still," she said, stepping back from the right side of my bed, "but your prognosis is now guarded instead of poor."

"Both good news and bad news in that one," Kathy went on, moving to the bottom of the bed to pull something from a holder placed somewhere there that I couldn't see.

I had no question for her, so I didn't reply, simply staring at her and waiting.

"The good news is that you may not die after all, and the bad news is that you aren't prognosis poor so you can't have your wife flown here at government expense to be with you."

"But, I didn't know," I breathed out, the NG tube down my nose and throat making it difficult to talk.

"No, almost nobody does, and there's usually too little time, anyway."

"It's like your brother," Kathy said.

"My brother?" I asked. "How do you know anything about my brother, much less why my wife's not coming has anything to do with him?"

"The file was just updated here by telegram," Kathy replied, "since he was evidently notified in the Army hospital where he's a patient in Yokohama. It appears he's coming to Yokosuka to see you before going home since he's being released."

"My question," I got out, the pain slowly beginning to edge out from under the morphine cloud that could only contain it for short periods of time.

"Oh, yes," Kathy said, remembering. "Your brother and you didn't have to be in the same combat theater. The Army and Marine Corps abide by the Sullivan policy, which means you would have had to apply to the heads of those services for one of you to go home, or someplace else. They always approve those, but neither of you apparently ever applied."

"But I didn't know," I said again, shocked to my core about how little I had understood, and still didn't understand, about going off to war.

"Yes," Kathy replied. "I've figured out, in my time here, that such things are not taught in any training school you might have attended, but they sure as hell should have been."

I didn't want Kathy to leave, but I wasn't sure I could take any more painful revelations about the stuff I had not gotten or lost because I was so ignorant about it.

“They’re both unconscious,” I said, trying to look back and forth, over at my companions in the room, surprised that the drapes, capable of going around each bed and suspended down with small chains and hooks, were not isolating each one of us in the until.

“Induced comas,” Kathy responded, “they’ll be out in a few days, but at least you’ll get to see their fathers again if they live. Both fathers are good guys.”

I’d never heard of Marine generals referred to in such casual and familiar terms before and my opinion about Kathy continued along on its steady rise. I wondered how long I’d be in the I.C.U. and how long it would be before my brother showed up at the hospital, and how long it would be until my next morphine shot. The pain was growing again, like a rising King Cobra in the jungle, with a bite that hurt like hell but didn’t mercifully kill you.

“Too bad they won’t be part of the Marine Corps Board of Inquiry coming here,” Kathy said, checking my I.V. flows, the bag I now wore on the outside of my stomach, and the tube running into my lower body part to take care of my ‘flow’ as she described it.

The phrase she’d mentioned, seemingly in passing, had taken a moment to penetrate through my drug-induced mind. A Board of Inquiry in the Marine Corps was aboard to investigate a circumstance or Marine Officer facing less than honorable discharge. It was a court, in reality, but not having as many tools or punishments a court-martial process might entail.

I desperately wanted to ask Kathy about who the board was meeting about and when, but could not get myself together enough to put the right words together before she was gone, sweeping through the double doors as Shoot had done before her.

I didn't know where my glasses were. All through Marine training, I'd been able to wear contact lenses but the conditions out in the field in Vietnam, especially down in a place so miserable in every physical way, as the A Shau Valley was, had forced me to dig out my emergency pair of regular glasses. Where they were now was probably anybody's guess. I wasn't going to watch television anyway, however, not under the circumstances. If the board of inquiry was for or about me then I wanted to see what was going on, not simply try to make out fuzzy shaped creatures across the room. I could see fine, but only up close and maybe out to ten feet out in front of me without my glasses. I pushed the red button I'd been given in case I needed something.

Kathy appeared through the doors in seconds.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"I need to talk to Corporal Shoot, and I need my glasses," I said.

"He works on the ward, not down here," she replied, moving close to the side of my bed, and pulling a drawer out of a small table I could only hear from where I lay.

"I need to see him about something personal, not related to his duties," I said, after a few seconds.



“Personal?” Kathy said, placing my folded glasses into my left hand. “You just got here, and you’ve been loaded on morphine. How could you have anything personal to discuss with a corpsman?”

I didn’t answer, slowly taking my glasses shakily between my bandaged bad hand and my nearly equally bandaged good hand.

Kathy pulled the glasses gently from my grasp and placed them carefully on my head. She stepped back a few paces, spread her arms out, and said “Voila, how do I look?”

I realized, for the first time, that she was a remarkably beautiful woman.

“You look good,” I replied.

“Well, hell, that doesn’t seem like much, but then good is the best report anyone can get on their condition and prognosis, so I’ll take it.”

She waited for a few seconds, before putting her arms down. I could literally see her facial expression changing, as she realized I was not answering her question about Shoot.

“I’ll get word to the ward, about the corporal,” she finally said, before flitting through the doors once more.

Seemingly hours later, a Marine Corps General, wearing greens and sporting two silver stars on each shoulder, stepped carefully through the double doors.

He walked to the bottom of the bed to my left. He had to be General Masters, I figured.

“How you doing son?” he asked across the short distance to the bed to his unconscious son, his voice low, soft, and not commanding at all.

The general’s son said nothing, of course, the breathing apparatus pushing air in and out of his lungs through long plastic tubes, in both Puller’s and Master’s situations, puffing and swishing to make the only sounds in the room.

“There’s a card, tucked into a small envelope at the bottom of your son’s bed, sir,” I said to the general. “I was condition critical and prognosis poor but just got upgraded to prognosis guarded. You might want to read that card if Kathy hasn’t told you anything for a while.”

“I see,” the general said, looking over at me, and then taking a few steps toward the corner of his son’s bed.

“Condition critical, prognosis fair,” he read, before putting it back. “Fair must be pretty good compared to poor. That’s a relief. Thank you.”

The general walked over to the side of my bed. “You’re new,” he said, “what happened to the guy before you?”

“Shipped out, they said, sir,” I replied, looking at the general’s chest full of ribbons, some that I couldn’t even recognize.

“Hmmm,” the general replied. “Tell me about yourself and what happened over there.”

I tried to give a good account of myself but the pain was beginning to slowly overpower my ability to

speaking. Kathy came through the doors while I was talking about my family.

"Okay, that's enough for him," she said briskly, acting more like the general than the general himself.

"Anything I can do for you, just let me know," General Masters said, patting my left shoulder lightly. "I'll be back every day until he's out of here."

"Pain shot," I replied, grimacing, meaning the words for Kathy.

"She'll do that, won't you Kathy?" the general said, this time using his general's voice while turning to face her directly.

"Yes, sir," Kathy replied, responding as formally to the man as he'd been to her.

"I'll take my leave," he said, bowing slightly toward me before turning and walking through the doors.

"You take orders pretty well," I got out between the waves of pain that were building at my very center and radiating outward to even the tips of my fingers and feet.

"Not too difficult," Kathy said, with a half-laugh. "Especially when properly equipped."

She held up the syringe she'd been carrying all along in her left hand. She grabbed my right arm I.V. tube, punched the needle through the plastic, and pushed the yellow liquid into me.

I felt the drug entering my system almost instantaneously, knowing however that the full effect of its magical presence would not be felt for several

minutes. Absolutely knowing that relief was coming was a form of relief all in of itself.

“Corporal Shoot’s outside,” Kathy said, discarding the syringe in her usual manner.

“Junior,” Shoot said, his head the only part of his body sticking through the doors.

“Need a minute of your time, alone,” I got out, still waiting for the drug to allow me to be fully communicative again.

“I’m gone,” Kathy said, going out as Shoot was coming in.

“What is it?” Shoot asked, his brow wrinkled and real curiosity in the tone of his voice.

“Board of Inquiry,” I said, my voice rough.

“Yeah, they’re waiting to talk to you. It’s the buzz of the whole hospital. They flew all the way from Da Nang, apparently. They sure want to talk to you. What happened in that valley you talk of, anyway?”

“What ranks are they?”

“Bird Colonels, three of them, a female staff sergeant carrying equipment and a major, probably along for the ride.”

“Court recorder, the woman,” I said more clearly, the drug beginning to do its work. I’d asked for the board officer ranks in hope that one or more of the officers was a lieutenant, but that wasn’t to be. A board of inquiry to dishonorably discharge would not be formed and implemented without having officers all senior to the rank of the person being investigated for discharge. The major would be the reporter, or

prosecutor if it had been civilian, so his rank didn't matter.

"I can have an advocate," I said, knowing that I could do at least that.

I could demand an attorney when the hearing started if it was a hearing about what I thought it was about.

"I need somebody tough and smart but I don't know anybody here like that."

"I sure do," Shoot said, "and you got it. You have been through hell, you're still in hell, and this is the last piss poor thing you need to have to put up with right now. I can't be there but you won't be alone."

"When are they coming?" I asked, preparing myself to talk to Kathy so that I would not be in my last hour of the morphine wearing off when they came.

"Doctor's cleared you for one twenty-minute session," Shoot said. "As soon as I leave here I'll get your advocate and have her scoot over here. And, don't ever forget something sir," Shoot went on, backing slightly away from the foot of my bed. "It don't mean nuttin,"

Shoot left without saying another word.

"She?" I whispered to the waving doors, the drug fully taking away the pain and allowing me to seemingly float a little over the top of the mattress I was on.

How could I ever return home or to the USA with a bad conduct or dishonorable discharge on my record? Would I even have to give the Purple Heart

back? My wife wouldn't care, I knew, but I was also sure that everyone else who found out sure would, especially when it came to getting a job, and for the rest of my life. Worse than the future, however, was trying my best not to review over and over in my head the number of times I had committed bad conduct or acted dishonorably. The discharge, if the board found against me, would be unbearably painful but it wouldn't be unjust.

"She?" I asked myself again. Who might the 'she' be?

The door opened and the Marine Staff Sergeant entered, pushing a cart with electronic equipment atop it before her. Shoot came in after her carrying a stack of folding chairs.

I breathed in and out deeply as if preparing for another charge of the North Vietnamese Army of getting ready to launch one on our own. I wondered as I waited, whether I would ever come out from under experiencing one terrifying event after another. The morphine helped reduce more than the physical pain, I realized. Although I was breathing deeply in preparation for coming combat, I was not feeling the core constricting terror I'd so often experienced down inside the A Shau Valley. The morphine would only allow me to feel fear. It blocked the stupefying terror that combat demanded, however.

The three Colonels walked through the double doors and Shoot departed. He turned slightly as he left, giving me a thumbs up with his right fist held close to his side and winking with one eye. Shoot was

telling me that it would all be okay, but I couldn't find any foundation for his having such a belief.

The colonels were all bird colonels, as he'd described. They sat down, arranging their three chairs in a straight line against the wall just out from Master's bed. The Staff Sergeant sat on the other side of the doors, between my bed and that of Puller. I watched her bend down and plug a cord in. I realized she was there, away from the colonels, because of where the only plug outlet was located.

I looked at the colonels, but none of them would look back at me. Another bad sign, I thought. I wondered if they would start with a reading of the charges, and tried to think of the specifics of things I'd done that might be the ones that they would use. The major entered last, after everyone else, bringing his own folding chair and carrying a thick briefcase. He placed the chair exactly in front of the swinging doors and then sat down on it. There would be no interference while the supposed twenty-minute hearing was taking place. He placed the briefcase down by his right side and then opened it to pull a thick file out and set it across his lap.

I looked up at the clock on the wall, memorizing the time. Twenty minutes of more hell, I thought. "Can I do twenty minutes?" I whispered to myself.

"Lieutenant?" the major asked, looking up from what I presumed to be my file.

I shook my head, afraid to say anything. I wouldn't whisper to myself I instructed myself, knowing that even having such thoughts was a

function of the drug I was on. How could they hold a hearing and convict me when I was so totally out of it, I had no idea, but I was still a Marine and by God, I would go out like one.

There was a push against the double doors, jarring the reading colonel, and when the doors did not immediately open, a hard, insistent knocking against the wall behind where the three colonels sat.

The major came to his feet and moved his briefcase and chair before easing the doors open a bit.

A tall woman piled right into him, physically moving the major before stepping to the bottom of my bed, and then turning to face the tribunal.

I recognized the woman and was shocked.

"Alright, let's get something straight here," she said loudly, pointing over at the three colonels. "I'm this patient's advocate and that pulls a lot of weight in this Navy facility. If I determine, for any reason, that the patient cannot or will not continue then this hearing is over. Does everyone understand?"

There was a silence in the room, only the respirators swishing away, as before.

"I'm sorry ma'am," the colonel on the left side of the three replied, keeping his own voice much softer and lower than the woman's. "You have no authority here."

"My husband is in command of this entire facility," the woman said. "He's waiting by his phone. If I call him, then, without delay, all of you will be



holding your so-called hearing in some Japanese restaurant in downtown Yokosuka.”

The colonel swallowed once and then looked at his fellow colonels, who did not look back at him.

“Out of consideration for your current position, we’re going to make an exception, off the record, ma’am.” The colonel pointed toward the Staff Sergeant and then slashed one finger across his neck. “We’ll begin this meeting, from the beginning, when the sergeant is ready.”

I waited, while everyone else waited, for the sergeant to get her machine ready.

Somehow, I felt better, even though I knew I was probably steaming full ahead into very rough and dangerous seas.

## Chapter IV

The room was silent, as the three colonels shifted and arranged papers in their laps. The major held up a single sheet of thick paper and began to read, as the staff sergeant readied her hands over a small electronic device that sat on the tiny top shelf of her toy-like mobile desk.

“In the matter of the investigation into the command of the Third Battalion, First Marine Division, and the command of that unit by Colonel...”

The major kept talking but I could no longer hear him. Tears flowed down my face as if some dam had cracked and was coming apart. They were there, the Board of Inquiry in my ICU unit, to investigate the colonel and not me. I was a witness, or so they supposed or knew. The major droned on for several minutes, but all I could do was look at the big clock above his head. I counted the seconds like I was in the last minutes of my fourth hour before another shot of morphine could be administered to me.

I didn't care about the colonel of my battalion, the three colonels over to the side of me, or about the board of inquiry, whatsoever.

I closed my eyes and moved my head from side to side, unable to wipe away the tears trapped on my drenched cheeks. The flow slowly stopped. I'd been unable to cry tears of grief, but I'd somehow been able to cry many tears of relief. I thought my life was over, once again, but another bridge had been thrown

across my Bong Song, another avenue of escape had opened up.

"I've got to stop 'my life is over' stuff from continuing," I whispered to myself.

"What did he say?" a voice from seemingly far away asked.

I felt a hand press my left bicep, but ever so gently, and then a whispered woman's voice spoke into my left ear, so close that the warmth of her breath seemed to penetrate straight into my brain.

"You are not under subpoena," the voice said. "You don't have to talk to these people at all if you don't want to."

I didn't answer her, although I did force my eyes open to blink away tears trapped there and look into her eyes.

"Please dry my face and give me a piece of ice," I whispered back, my mouth so dry that I could barely get the words out.

In seconds my skin was being wiped down by someone on the right side of the bed. I hadn't known that Kathy was in the room until then. An ice chunk slid into my mouth and I sucked on it greedily, holding the piece with my back molars.

One colonel after another asked a question, but their words were all gibberish to me. If I lived, then I was going home and would have a chance of regaining my life back. I could not think past my wife and daughter and my renewed hope in getting back to the real world.

“He’s not going to say anything,” a voice I now recognized as the Navy Captain’s wife said, from very close by.

“I’m getting his next morphine injection from the nurse’s station,” Kathy said, stepping to where the major sat blocking the double doors.

The major grabbed his papers and leaped to his feet, sliding himself and the chair closer to where the three colonels sat to get out of her way.

There was a silence in the room. In only seconds Kathy was back, entering through the doors and walking directly to my side. I’d gotten my last morphine shot only minutes prior to the board coming into the room. I might not be able to survive another one administered so quickly after the last one. I tried to warn Kathy but she moved too quickly. Flicking the plastic protective tip from the syringe, she approached and then plunged the needle into my I.V. mess of small pads, blocks, and tubes taped to my right arm. She tossed the empty syringe into the can behind the Captain’s wife, with her usual accuracy.

“Close your eyes,” the woman’s voice said directly into my left ear. “It’s saline, not morphine. You are about to be unconscious.”

I closed my eyes, in relief once more, and gratitude. I got it. The Captain’s wife, Kathy, and probably Shoot, were all banding together to save me as best they could. In that instant, I knew that the three, a nurse, a corpsman, and a volunteer were a whole lot more than I had originally thought. I was not under investigation, but could easily be under

investigation. In one of my sociology classes at St. Norbert a visiting police officer had lectured and said something as unlikely and nearly unbelievable as I'd ever heard a law enforcement officials say. He said that most people in prison didn't get there because of what they'd done. They got there because of what they'd said they'd done.

Even with the noises of chairs moving and many people talking in low tones it was easy, with great assistance from the earlier morphine shot, to simply drift into a deep sleep. I knew as I faded away, that I would be wide awake in a couple more hours. The pain, when it appeared again in full bloom, would have nothing to do with allowing any sleep at all when it once again wrested full control from the deadening morphine.

Two days, and two very long and difficult nights, went by. The trappings of tape and plastic attached at different points to my body had come down in number to the point where being naked under the sheet they kept over me, it made me feel almost naked. The single I.V. dripped away, the smaller bandages on my stomach were changed twice a day. Kathy always changed them just after I received an injection for the pain, probably because without that drug the experience would have been even more awful, for both of us.

Life changed a little on the morning of the fifth day of October. Both Lieutenant Masters and Lieutenant Puller were brought out of their comas. Puller's ventilator was removed, but not Masters'.

Finally, in what I thought to be late afternoon, the room emptied completely. The room never fully darkened at night, but the lights were cut to about half power. I'd been too cold in my ward room upstairs but in the I.C.U. I was over-heating to the point of perspiring visibly into the sheet beneath me. Kathy and two other nurses I didn't really know came and went, changing sheets and cleaning everything with disinfectants.

"I can't go home like this," Puller said, without turning his head toward me.

"We're alive," was all I could think to reply.

"Oh God, the pain drugs don't stop the pain," Masters squeezed out.

I thought about the mess the other officers were in, and that I was in. The losses both officers had suffered were apparent and discussed by the medical staff. I didn't know what I'd lost myself and was too wounded to truly take inventory. I had my legs and arms, but would my left leg, where the hip had been shattered by one of the bullets, ever heal enough for me to walk? What really remained under the bandages left of my hand, where I'd cut it so badly, but was not Purple Heart awarding, I didn't know. We were all in agony but, for me at least, it was better to be in agony with them than to be alone.

Dr. Ahtai entered through the double doors. Kathy had indicated, during the transfer, that the leading doctor of all Japan had taken an interest in my case. She'd said he was a cardiologist but the only

heart problem I'd had was the stoppage for a bit when they'd cranked my bed up too quickly.

The doctor was followed by two assistants whom I presumed were doctors too. The small Japanese man didn't speak to me, checking my chart and then pulling back the sheet that covered my open wounds.

"Staples, heal from inside out," he observed, pointing while talking to his two assistants. "Messy but effective," he commented, analytically.

He then pulled a tape measure from his pocket and began measuring my torso, and then my main incision. I stared down for the first time, thinking about what Puller had said about not being able to go home. I tried to take it all in, my upper body slightly angled up by the bed. I was going to have terrible scars. One bullet had gone into my right side just above the hip bone. I knew just by looking. The small bullet hole was apparent, not stitched or taped over because a scab was already formed. That bullet had to have done in my left hip, which was a mass of stitched wounds from the surgery. My torso was cut from top to bottom in the middle and seemed to lay open, leaving a chasm up and down, several inches deep. The other two bullets had gone in and out leaving small holes like the lower one but bigger ones on the other side. Somehow, they hadn't hit my lungs or heart, or apparently much of anything else.

"Very interesting case," Dr. Ahtai said. "Should not have lived, but here now. Infection everywhere. We must lower temperature, anti-biotics, and put pump in."

The assistants both nodded, like the doctor's presentation was perfectly understandable.

Abruptly the three turned and walked out through the swinging double doors without saying anything more.

"What's a pump?" I said to myself.

"Funny," Puller said, from over on my right side. "Condition critical, prognosis messy."

General Master's son had been brought out of his induced coma, at nearly the same time as Puller but he was still on a ventilator so there was no ability to converse with him and have him answer, anyway.

I pushed my button to call Kathy.

Minutes later she appeared, but with a small team of white-smocked and masked assistants. They came into the room as a group, almost pushing Kathy to one side.

"They came with the pump," Kathy said, as the four medically attired males surrounded my bed and went to work unpacking some boxes they'd brought with them.

"What pump?" I asked, incidentally checking the wall clock for the drug time.

I was an hour and a half deep into my four-hour run. I was afraid of having work done on me without the buffer of an immediate shot. No matter what was done to me seemed to cause great pain, unless it was refilling my small cup with ice. The four men worked away, finally opening one last little cubic box. One man pulled out what looked like a small fish-tank



pump, and set it down gently on my undamaged hip, while another was slipping a thick pad under it.

“Call me if they get out of hand,” Kathy said, before departing through the double doors.

I sighed, as deeply as I could. There would be no relief shot coming. I could gut out the next few hours I knew, but staring down at the four working, but totally silent ‘beavers,’ made me apprehensive and a bit afraid.

An attendant pulled the adhesive loose that held the patch the surgeons had put over what I knew was my colostomy hole. The hole was awful looking, down and to the left of the even more awful central incision running up and down my torso. That incision gaped a couple of inches wide and seemingly as deep.

Quickly and expertly, like they’d done the procedure many times, the men coordinated to run a clear plastic tube down into the hole, and then many inches in until they stopped and looked at one another. Without comment, preamble, or warning two of the men on my left side tilted me over. Pain shivered its way up and down my body, my broken hip radiating its terrible complaint to the point where I couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t scream. I couldn’t scream for some reason. Tears again rolled down my face. One man, positioned at the bottom of my bed ran a tube straight into my lower body on my backside. The violation of everything in my physical world had reached the point of intolerance. I couldn’t handle it anymore. I grabbed the metal post holding my I.V. up and crashed it down to the floor.

The men slapped my body back down on the bed, raced to connect their tubes to the fish tank pump, strapped it securely to my hip, added some surgical tape, and then ran a cord out and plugged it into a socket located somewhere on the wall behind the head of my bed. Even quicker, two of the men attached one of the plastic lines to a series of clear plastic bags, like I.V. bags, they'd taped to the bottom metal support structure below my feet. One of the bags was filled with clear fluid. The pump began to vibrate, and I watched the clear liquid began to move, little bubbles purging out of the lines as it moved. A coldness came over the lower part of my body as I felt the liquid flow through me, like it was a running mountain stream, flowing from my chest down to my legs. The pump suddenly turned off...and the men pulled back, obviously waiting. No one moved to fix or raise the I.V. bag I'd thrown down out of agony and desperation.

Kathy appeared through the doors and stopped to take in the scene. I noted the quiet sound of the I.V. alarm going off, it's ding, ding, ding, seemingly very unimportant in adding anything but an exclamation point to the one-act drama taking place on the top, and bottom, of my body.

The pump suddenly vibrated.

Nobody moved, least of all me. I stared down at the strapped and taped thing like it was some sort of small nuclear plant powering my body to continue on.

The pump shut off, and everyone sprang into action. The four attendants worked to get their stuff

together while Kathy walked around them and went to work on fixing the I.V. Suddenly, the men departed, the pump turned on again but there was only Kathy and me to pay attention to it.

“What’s this like for patients who’ve had it?” I asked, thinking about trying to accommodate the unpredictable thing day and night.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” Kathy replied, looking over at the pump and then down into my eyes. “I think that Japanese doctor, who everyone says is so brilliant, is trying this out to irrigate your lower bowel. If that works then they want to enter the peritoneum and irrigate your entire containment center.”

“Oh great, like this isn’t bad enough. More surgery for the tubes.”

“You already have drains up and down, and all over, really, so they shouldn’t have to cut you anymore,” Kathy replied, pointing at various small bandages spotted all over my stomach.

“I’ll be back in an hour with some medication,” she said, before turning.

“My arm hurts where the I.V. is,” I said, hoping she was talking about another pain shot, to be delivered an hour early.

“That’s the antibiotics I keep injecting,” Kathy replied. “Heavy-duty antibiotics are irritating before they dilute and spread themselves out. You have to have them because of all the junk that got inside you when you were hit and struggling in the jungle.”

The pump turned on as Kathy went through the swinging doors. I watched the clock. There was nothing else to do. The pump stayed on for two minutes and ten seconds before shuddering off again. Sleeping had been iffy and broken ever since I'd gotten out of the last surgery. What was it going to be like now in the night, I wondered.

The pump turned on, and then off, while I waited for Kathy to return. The pump had taken over my life, I realized. I was living in expectation of its turning on or off. My timing it using the wall clock had proven fruitless as a predictive tool. The pump didn't work at any time pattern. It went on and off for reasons I couldn't figure out. It would cycle after two minutes or maybe five. There was no pattern to it that I could figure out, and I'd worked the problem for hours before Puller said one word.

"What the hell, there's no predicting this thing," I said to the room, forgetting that Puller was awake.

"Pressure," he said, his voice more a hoarse whisper than anything else.

The pump was responding to resistance, I realized, and then I proved Puller's theory by pushing down on the site near where the tube went into the open incision. The pump went on immediately. I found out very quickly that I could turn the pump on at will, but not turn it off at all.

"We've been put in here to die, haven't we?" Puller asked, between coughs.

"No, they didn't have to put us anywhere special to die," I answered immediately. "They would simply

let us lay on a gurney somewhere in some dark hallway until we were gone. Then we'd be receiving care in the mortuary."

"I wish I could laugh," Puller coughed out. "You're pretty funny."

"I'd say I do stand-up comedy, but, under the circumstances, I guess I have to confess I only do lay down."

"Yes, keep going," Puller responded, no longer coughing.

Kathy came through the double doors, leading the aged 'volunteer' and Shoot, both of whom had so heavily supported me when the hearing had been conducted. The hearing wasn't about me but I could so easily have converted it into being all about me without their quick thinking and help. I was happy to see them, particularly when I noted the syringe Kathy held down by her left side.

"I see you're conversing with Lieutenant Puller," the volunteer said.

"He's very funny, you know," Puller said.

The old volunteer stopped between our beds and turned to look down into my eyes.

"You keep that up, talking to him," she whispered. "You're all he has right now, you know."

She turned to minister to Puller, while Shoot approached the bed from the other side.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my pump turning on and drawing everyone's attention before cycling off again. "I thought you weren't allowed to work in here."

"I brought the shampoo," he said, "and the water basin. I can go anywhere she tells me to, as long as I'm with her."

"Shampoo?" I asked a bit mystified.

"Yeah, your hair, it's a stinky mess," Shoot replied, producing a green bottle of something that read "Head and Shoulders."

"What's Head and Shoulders?" I asked, never having heard of the shampoo.

Shoot replied, "For your dandruff, which, between the chunks of leaves and mud, is pretty bad."

"Funny," I heard Puller say. "Dandruff, yeah, that's a real problem. Better get that on your prognosis. Messy with a slash mark and then 'dandruff.' He laughed very gently.

The volunteer turned toward me with a beaming smile on her face, like I was doing great at entertaining Puller, even though the rather unintentional humor had been more Shooter's than mine.

Kathy injected the liquid from her syringe into my I.V. The relief I instantly felt I knew was not justified by the physics necessary for the drug to actually circulate through my system and physically affect me. The very nature of the quite real relief forced me to rethink the ridiculousness I had always held as my reaction to anyone discussing the placebo effect. I never believed in that effect and, even if I had, I would have assumed the effect to only occur in those who did not know about whether they were receiving the real thing or the placebo. The morphine affecting me

but not really there yet was changing more than my being relieved of pain.

"Here they come," Shoot whispered to me, and then turned to the volunteer who'd changed her orientation to behind the top of the bed in order to prepare my hair to be washed.

Several people, in civilian attire, filed slowly through the double doors. They were all wearing surgical face masks.

"What are you here for?" the imposing volunteer woman asked, as they gathered at the foot of my bed.

"We're visiting medical personnel from a conference nearby," a diminutive man answered, pointing at my stomach. "We came to see the effectiveness of Dr. Ahtai's brilliant work."

"We'll be back in a few minutes when your admirers are gone," the aging volunteer whispered into my ear, leaning down to the point where her lips almost touched my right ear.

"You are different," she went on, "nobody normally attracts all this attention, and it's to be determined later whether that's a good or bad thing."

The morphine hit me, and although I wanted to say something all I could do was smile back at her. I had not done anything to attract attention, I wanted to say. The colonel was being investigated by the board of inquiry, not me. The pump was something of Dr. Ahtai's rather bizarre design, not mine. I didn't want to be notable anymore. I just wanted to be able to get through the next four hours.





## Chapter V

There was night and day in the I.C.U., only the night was brought about by merely dimming the existent lighting enough so that the pain drug clock could barely be seen. Visitors did not come at night. Doctors only came if emergency care was necessary. Kathy, or dim replacements for her, came with the syringes, which never hurt since the needles were always injected straight into the plastic piping running to the needle already in my body.

The pump never slept. The morphine waves could be ridden into a state of near-sleep, while the first hour of their effectiveness was in full bloom, but the pump was ceaseless in its unpredictable efforts to make sleep its fiercest enemy. The tube they ran into another drain hole was called a shunt, I learned, although the doctors never spoke to me unless it was to ask a question about some move or reaction they'd done. and then wanted direct feedback. The shunt had gone in without pain but its insertion all the way to the end, my end, had been very slow and labored. My bowels were all stitched back together, Shoot had informed me earlier, and the inserters didn't want to risk tearing any of them apart. Once the tube was fully through me the saline flowed, not in bottles per shift or even hour, but for each half an hour. They called it the 'sippy' time because, when and if I ever became

capable of eating again the diet would start out as one ounce of some magnesium alloyed milk on the half-hour and one ounce of water on the hour. That start, even when it converted to one ounce of Gerber baby pudding and one ounce of real milk, was referred to as the sippy diet by everyone.

The bottles came and went on the sippy schedule, providing even less incentive to sleep. There had seemed no escape from the A Shau, only days before, but here I was, trapped again, I thought. There seemed no escape from the pump but there had to be some small corner of probability that would finally rise up to release me, even if that was a terminal release.

"You sound like my mother's Singer sewing machine," Masters said, "what are you making?"

I turned my head to look at him but his features were hidden behind a towel draped over some guard they'd put around him to keep him from falling out of his bed.

"Cookies," I replied, my drug-addled mind not putting two and two together.

"You can't sew cookies," Master's replied, almost a laugh in his tonal inflection.

"Sure, you can," Puller chimed in, "you just have to do it very very carefully."

"Yeah," I said, "you have to work carefully around the chocolate chips."

Kathy walked in, the two doors swinging widely behind her.

The pump came on for a few seconds.

“You did that on purpose,” Masters said, “to win the argument.”

“What’s going on?” Kathy asked, standing at the foot of my bed.

The pump shut off.

“The sewing machine is afraid of her,” Puller said, an actual laugh coming out only a few seconds after his comment.

I watched Kathy’s eyes get just a little larger, as she stared over to where the lieutenant lay, his bed not more than ten feet from my own. She glanced back down at me, a warmth in her eyes I hadn’t noticed before.

“You two get your shot in two hours and ten minutes,” she said to me.

I knew that, of course, as the clock never left my hawk-eyed visual field. Two hours and ten minutes and forty seconds, to be exact, I thought but didn’t say anything.

“You two are on almost the same schedule, Q4H, just like him, except about an hour later,” she said to Puller and Masters.

We were all getting morphine every four hours. I wondered why she’d come in to tell us something all of us had to know.

“You want your next shot along with them?” she asked, looking deep into my eyes.

I was already beginning to sink into the valley of pain, where the agony would increase incrementally with each passing minute for the remainder of my time. Kathy was asking me to take another hour of

raw agony. I waited to see if she'd provide some reason for her question but she said nothing, merely waiting with patience only a nurse of her caliber could muster up.

I got it, suddenly, just as my pump came on again. Kathy was asking me to make a sacrifice to be riding the waves with my two new lieutenant friends. She wanted me to be right there with them, at least for the first two hours when communication among us was possible. I knew she could give me extra morphine if she judged that to be necessary, but she didn't want to do it for the purpose she had in mind. Her eyes continued to stare into my own. They needed me. The company had needed me. Kilo had needed me. They're needing me had been as powerful a survival tool for me as it had been for some of them.

"I can do it," I finally replied, the pump turning off as if to add an exclamation point to my statement. I swallowed without liquid, and then breathed in and out deeply a few times. I glanced over at the clock. Three hours and three minutes to go. I could do it, but it was going to be a very rough ride. Kathy wanted me to help Puller and Masters through, which I had no problem with. Secretly, as the pain began to replace whatever normality tried to sustain me, I also understood that it also meant I was not likely without body parts I could not examine myself to determine I either had or might be missing. Both Puller and Masters seemed like much more 'worth it' as officers

and gentlemen than I could ever hope to be. I could do the time.

I rode the remainder of my last withdrawn drug hour in deep breathing silence. I was back in the A Shau. I felt the water dripping down my face from the monsoon mist, and the bugs and leeches were back, as my skin seemed to itch, crawl, and then flutter with light pain. I rode the waves my mind created to 'surf' me through without a board. The wave of pain came at me and I breathed in. The wave grew higher, but I held my breath against the onslaught, and then slowly let the air out of my lungs. The wave passed and the pain wore slowly down, ever lower in intensity lower. Like the real ocean, itself imagined and out in its element, it never truly went away. The cycle, as I watched the hazy clock on the wall, took forty-four seconds. My artillery mind calculated. 44 seconds came down to 81.818181...forever, times a minute. Four thousand, nine hundred and eight waves later I was through, even though I was not through the ordeal on into the future.

Kathy walked through the doors, moved quickly to the I.V., and ended the nightmare. Her presence alone ended the surfing competition, her smile down at me so real and genuine that I responded, even though I knew my own was more a grimace than a true smile. She moved first to Puller's side and then to Masters before leaving. She didn't speak, so I knew she'd be returning soon.

The shot hit with its expected warm and smoothly explosive relief. Coming from so far down

and so tightly held to such relief was beyond describable. I'd heard an expression many years earlier about the fact that pain had no memory. It had a memory all right, I knew. How long the memory of such agony would last I had no idea, but I also knew, down to almost a genetic level, that I would never ever forget either the enormity of it or the detail in which it came at me.

Kathy re-entered the I.C.U. through the double doors, but the doors didn't swing shut, instead, they were held open by Shoot, for the Navy Captain's wife to enter. It wasn't time for a shot I knew, although I couldn't help but glance at the face of the big clock. Then I noted that Kathy's eyes were wet. She was crying. I caught my breath, not knowing what to expect, but expecting the worst.

"I have a reply to the telegram you sent to your parents," Kathy said, holding out a piece of yellow paper before her.

My breath rushed out. My parents. I had so feared for my wife and daughter but it was only my parents. Shoot had sent the telegram.

"Your arms are in too bad a shape to hold this, so I'll read it to you, but it's very difficult," Kathy began, the telegram in her shaking hand.

"Hang tough," Masters said, from my left.

I sensed that the letter she was holding was from my father.

"It's from my father, I know, and I understand," I said to Kathy. "It's okay, whatever it says, that's the way he is."

I looked into Kathy's eyes and saw a certain relief, but also a hint of criticism. I knew I was right, about my father being the author, and I felt better.

"Okay," she replied, hesitantly beginning to read the salutation and date before she got to the message. When that was done, she began:

"Don't bother with sending any more of the wounded war hero letters home. Whatever you're doing over there, if you are over there, isn't something we want to know anything about. We have our own problems."

Kathy stopped reading, the unfolded letter hanging from her right hand, her eyes moist and red from the tears.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's okay," I replied, no feeling of grief, anger, or even emotional upset evident in my words or expression.

"He's been dealing with this all his life," the Captain's wife, our volunteer, said, from behind Kathy, "and those hurtful words, intended to cause pain, won't in this case."

"That's the way he is, and my mom goes along with it," I said, Kathy's sympathy and tears bothering me more than any message from my father.

"You joined the Marines because of him," the volunteer went on, taking the letter from Kathy's hand and reading it for herself.

"You too?" Puller asked, making everyone in the room look over at him where he lay.

“All of us,” Masters added, his voice soft but firm.

“So, you’re in good company,” the volunteer said, looking up over her glasses at me.

I didn’t know what to say so I said nothing. I much appreciated the support and comradery of both Puller and Masters, but my relationship with my parents was a whole lot more complex than could be explained by my joining the Marines to get away from them or because they wanted me to. It was true that I had been raised in Marine messes and singing the Marine Corps Hymn from an early age. My dad had wanted to be a Marine but been forced to join the Coast Guard when the Marines inexplicably turned him down in 1940. My father had so resented my success at getting through Marine OCS that he’d failed to show up to pin my gold bars on when I was commissioned. His resentment of my service had come all the way through to make its way to me in Yokosuka, generated by Shoots, no doubt, glowing somewhat heroic message that had gone to him.

“Do you want me to write something back?” Kathy asked, slowly recovering herself.

“He does not,” the volunteer, Barbara, said, reading that message straight from my stare back, and my facial expression. I’d done my part in getting messages back to both my parents and my wife. My mission now was to survive, and that was it.

Kathy, Barbara, and Shoot departed, as they’d come, the volunteer taking a brief moment to approach the red trash bin Kathy used as a receptacle for old syringes. She curled up and tossed



my father's letter into the container without a glance or comment, before following the other two out through the swinging doors.

"Man, Junior," Puller laughed out, in his broken way. "No wonder you have this tough hombre reputation. My father's strict but he's not like your dad at all. He's proud that I made it through the Basic School and got my butter bars, although it was no fun having him at the commissioning ceremony."

"My dad's great," Masters said, from the other side of my bed.

"Yeah, I met him while you were out," I replied to Masters. "He's a class act, not like a general at all."

"You met him as my dad, not as a general, but as my dad, so don't forget that or it may cause you more pain," Masters replied.

"More pain," Puller tried to laugh out. "I like that. More pain," he repeated.

It had to be the drugs circulating in my system that made me sleepy, as well as being able to understand what Masters and Puller were saying less and less. The pain, I knew, was out there on the threshold, like a large wave set way offshore, heading in but taking its ponderous time. I wanted to sleep but I didn't want to waste whatever rational time I had until the set arrived. When it came in I would not be able to sleep.

My pump came on, and caught me by surprise, as my stomach vibrated away for many seconds.

"Ah, the Singer is at work once more," Masters said, but I was beyond replying.

Two days and nights went by, slowly and painfully. The moments of clarity and marginal peace, with the pain held back, made living almost worth it. I could not write home because both of my wrists were still fastened down, one for the I.V. and the other for the drawing of blood and the transfusions of occasional pints of blood. That I was AB positive was bothersome to the staff because only two percent of humans have that particular blood type. It's the universal receptor blood type because only AB positive people can receive any other blood and survive, however, the medical staff preferred to match the same type with the same type, for never discussed reasons.

"You're not going to need any more blood after this," Kathy said on the third morning following my dad's fateful letter.

She punched the needle into my elbow vein and let the metal clamp loose. The blood flowed through the tube, looking like liquid ketchup. As soon as it began to flow into my bloodstream I felt better, with more energy. Beefsteak, Puller called fresh blood transfusions, and he had a point.

"What about the pump?" I asked.

"Yeah, what about the damned pump?" Masters asked. "How in hell are we supposed to sleep with that thing going off and on all the time?"

"I thought you said you weren't sleeping, anyway," Kathy shot back. "Dr. Ahtai makes that decision, and I think he has. Your white blood count is just over four thousand now," she said to me. "That

can be normal for most people, although you're far from fitting that description. I think the pump will come out tomorrow. It won't hurt a bit."

"I wish nobody would ever say that," I replied. "Everything here hurts in some way or another."

"You go, Junior," Puller added.

"See?" I replied, nodding at Kathy's back.

"Your brother's coming," Kathy replied, clearing my mind of all thoughts about the pump or anything else.

"He's coming where?" I asked, in mild shock.

"He's coming to Yokosuka from Yokohama before he ships home," Kathy said, matter-of-factly, like she was talking about the weather.

"How's he going to get here?" I wondered, out loud, having no idea where Yokosuka was in Japan, much less where Yokohama was in relation to it.

"I imagine he'll catch a ride in somebody's car or maybe take a bus or train," Kathy replied. "It's only twenty-five miles from here, or so."

Kathy exited the room, while I watched the doors slowly stop swinging behind her. I realized, for the first time, that I'd lost track of when my next shot was due. My brother. We'd only become close in the last year before ending up in Vietnam. Having bad parents didn't mean that the siblings banded together to fight or resist them. It had been just the opposite, with me, my brother, and sister going totally independent. It had been 'every man for himself' since I could remember, until the last year. I wanted to see my

brother badly, I realized. If I didn't make it then he was all Mary and Julie would have.

"Your brother?" Puller asked. "What's your brother doing in Yokohama?"

"Wounded," I replied. "Army hospital there. He was with the Big Red One at Bien Hoa, but he's okay now, I guess. I don't know anything for certain because I wasn't notified until right before I got hit."

"Bien Hoa," Puller whispered. "We were out of An Hoa. Life is so strange."

"Wow," Masters piped in. "Your family's taken quite a hit from this war."

I knew my brother had been wounded, but the severity of his injuries hadn't been a part of the telegram I'd gotten. If he was being discharged from the Army hospital, however, and being allowed to travel on his own to visit me, then he couldn't have been hit too badly, I knew. Masters was very badly injured and likely to lose his right leg, while Puller was missing both legs and part of his right hand. My family hadn't paid nearly the price that the two men's families had who were right in the same room with me. I said nothing, however.

Kathy was as good as her word. Dr. Ahtai returned but did not perform the simple procedure. He merely made a few notes after examining the entry vent he'd used days before to insert the tubing for the pump. The tubes and bottles were quickly removed, and there was no pain. Without a word, Dr. Ahtai and his assistants left the room. Kathy reappeared. Obviously, she'd been waiting until they were done.

Dr. Ahtai was obviously an important member of the medical staff.

The timing had been a bit off, as all three of us in the I.C.U. were at the very end of our four-hour period. Neither Puller nor Masters were able to remain completely silent in their suffering. I understood. I had a few more days on them and I, although grievously wounded, didn't have the severity of the damage to my body as they had to theirs. I'd moaned for hours only days and nights before. It was almost impossible, under intense pain, to make no noise at all.

Kathy brought the syringes and very quickly injected all of our I.V. tubes.

In minutes, while Kathy disposed of her equipment, the relief in the room became palpable, and the moaning stopped completely.

"When's he coming?" I asked, knowing Kathy would understand immediately who I was talking about. I was so relieved that the pump was gone. I hadn't wanted my brother to see it or be there when the thing went on.

"He's here," Kathy said. "I just wanted to give you a few minutes to accommodate the medication. "I'll get him."

Kathy walked out and I breathed deeply in and out, forgetting I had very conscious and cogent roommates.

"You'll be fine," Puller said. "He's your brother, after all, not your father."

“Too true,” Masters added, “and you can make believe we’re not even here.”

I knew Masters was kidding and I enjoyed that fact. Both lieutenants were responding to real conversation and there was some humor buried inside them that was surfacing.

“I wish one of you was my brother,” I gushed out, not fully understanding where the comment had come from.

“We’re both your brothers, or haven’t you guessed that by now?” Puller said.

My brother walked slowly through the double doors, slipping through between them rather than pushing them aside, as Kathy and Shoot did. He moved like a prowling, feral cat. I knew he’d been in the bush for a long time, just by the way he moved. He was wearing his full Class A green uniform. I noted that he already displayed his purple heart on his chest, along with his National Defense and Vietnam campaign ribbons. His face was one welcoming smile as he walked to the right side of my bed and turned to look down upon me. His smile disappeared, as Kathy had not replaced the sheet over my wounds following the procedure.

My brother took two steps back, almost contacting Masters’ bed before quickly leaning over and throwing up onto the floor.

## Chapter VI

Shoot appeared from seeming nowhere. I hadn't noticed the doors swinging at all.

He helped my brother back to a vertical position and gave him a towel, and then went to work cleaning up the mess on the floor.

"So sorry," my brother said over to me, and then followed up with "you don't look that bad, really."

"Army, you've got to be Army," Puller commented from the bed on my right.

"He's on drugs," I quickly added, to my brother, to counter Puller's stinging rebuke.

"We're all on drugs," Masters said.

"Who are these men?" my brother asked, wiping his mouth and lower face.

Shoot was done and out of the room in seconds, leaving the four of us alone.

"You're in the I.C.U., so take a guess," I replied.

"Marines?" he asked, looking from one bed to another.

"Navy," Masters said, which surprised me.

If Master was in the Navy and he was a lieutenant, then he held a rank equivalent to a captain in the Marine Corps.

"Thank you, sir, for your comment then," my brother said.

My meeting with my brother was not going well, I realized. I needed something to normalize it in some

way, but both Puller and Masters were not about to be put down or left out of anything.

The Navy Captain's wife, Barbara, stepped through the double doors.

"How are we all doing in here?" she asked, her tone overly sweet, but I could see the glint of humor in her eyes.

The woman had an uncanny ability to figure out what was really going on, I knew, and here she was again, tossing me a life buoy.

"This is my brother," I said, weakly waving what I could of my left hand toward where he stood, next to the bed.

"Pleased to meet you, Barbara said, moving toward where my brother stood and extending her hand, which he hesitantly shook.

"You were wounded and were just released from Yokohama Army Hospital," she intoned, not in question, as if reading from a non-existent chart. "My name's Barbara."

I knew what she was doing immediately. She was letting Puller and Masters know that my brother was one of us and not some slick 'in the rear with the gear' support officer.

"Army Ranger, it says on your shoulder," Puller said, his voice not strident like it had been before. "Knew a few of those guys back home. Not bad."

I knew it was going to be alright then, as long as my brother didn't blow it.

"When you get home, you might consider minimizing my injuries a bit," I said, as Kathy walked



into the room, moved to my bed, and then pulled the sheets over my open wounds. "I wrote home but the reply from dad was pretty terrible."

"I'm not going there," my brother replied. "I'm headed for Virginia and a transfer into intelligence if I sign up for a career doing this."

"Your face, it looks better," I said, realizing for the first time that his pock-marked facial skin was no longer pock-marked at all. My brother had unaccountably suffered from a series of years where pimples had covered most of his face.

"Yeah, I was burned by the fuel in the APC that got hit," my brother replied. "the heat melted the top layer of my exposed skin and this smoother stuff is the result. Not all bad."

He held up his hands. I could see that they'd been exposed too, but must have taken a stronger hit from the heat, as the tops of them were pretty badly scarred. Two of his fingers were still bandaged together. He held up that hand. They broke two fingers getting me out of the burning APC. They said I wouldn't get a second purple heart for that though because it was caused by friendlies.

I laughed out loud. "Me too," I rasped out, trying to hold up my own bandaged right hand, but it was taped to the side of the bed.

"When you were getting aboard the chopper?" he asked.

"Something like that," I replied, my crooked smile disappearing.

There was no way I was going to try to explain to him that I'd cut myself trying to get morphine to deaden my pain. Maybe I could tell Puller and Masters later on, as both, I knew, would enjoy the story. But not my brother. I didn't want to risk alienating him in any way.

"You want to play chess?" Barbara asked, from the foot of the bed, Kathy at her side.

"What?" I asked back, not being able to quite keep up with the change of subject.

"Your brother wants to play," she replied. "I'll have Shoot get a small raised and swinging table if you think you're up to it."

"Okay," I said, wondering why my brother might choose to spend our time together playing a game he almost never won.

I'd been a chess prodigy since early in high school. But there was nothing to be done for it except give in.

"What's your time like?" I asked.

"I'm out of here tomorrow morning, so I've got the day, and a bit tomorrow," my brother responded. "This Naval base is huge and quite something else. The airstrip is big enough to catch a direct flight to Hawaii, and then on to the continental USA, unlike the small airport at Yokohama. They have Yokosuka Curry here too, and I've just got to have some of that. You order a Rolex yet? The overseas PX is great and cheap as hell. You can get a Rolex for about two-fifty."

I stared at my brother like he was an alien just landed on my planet. With a wife and new daughter, and iffy pay going home to her, I was in no shape to buy any kind of watch, much less one that cost about the pay I took home in any month. There was nothing to be said, although my brother went on and on about the great deals on Sansui, Aiwa, and other brands of Japanese stereo equipment pieces that were an absolute steal at the base PX.

Shoot showed up, pulling along one of the tables used to feed the patients, those getting real food, which was none of the three of us in I.C.U. He carried a box in his free hand as he maneuvered the table to my bed and then swung the long, extended top of it to a position that was slightly in front of me. He opened the box and unfolded a portable chessboard.

"You want to set these up, sir, because I don't play chess," Shoot said, before going to work on untapeing my left hand from the bed frame. "You won't be getting any transfusions for a while and your blood count is good," he went on, while he worked.

My brother set the pieces up.

"You can be white, since you're the wounded one here," he murmured.

"Generous of you," Puller said, with a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yeah, but he's Army, and you know how that is, even if he is a Ranger," Masters added.

"Don't fatigue yourself too much," Barbara said to me, ignoring the comments made by both Puller

and Masters, “you’ve got to get through a few hours, starting pretty soon here.”

Kathy smiled at my obvious happiness in having my brother by my side. I didn’t care about the chess or the comments of my fellow I.C.U. residents. My brother being there was like having a bit of home at my side.

Barbara, our volunteer, Kathy, and Shoot all exited the room as my brother and I squared off across the board.

I opened the game by advancing my king’s pawn to the fourth square. The Sicilian Defense was my favorite opening game, the proper moves and counter-moves well memorized, until now. My brother responded by advancing his own king’s pawn. My mind would not work. I could not remember the sequences to the brilliant opening. I started moving pieces without really knowing what I was doing. My brother took every advantage. We played silently for half an hour before I was forced to resign. My brother was quietly jubilant, I could tell, but all I could do was smile at his obvious happiness. He’d won few games against me through the years, and here he was easily able to defeat me at will, and I didn’t care.

I suddenly began to perspire heavily. I’d entered the zone of pain, with the morphine’s effect diminishing. I could not play another game. I knew that in a very short order I was not going to be able to communicate much, either.

Barbara and Kathy came through the double doors.

“Time for a break, lieutenant,” Kathy said to my brother.

“He’ll be undergoing a few procedures for a bit,” Barbara said, also to my brother. “Why don’t you get lunch at the cafeteria and come back about one.”

Shoot reappeared, cleared the table, and then ran it against the wall next to the red waste container. I tried to rest, back to breathing into the pain, riding the waves, and trying to think about reconstructing the chess game. In the past, I could always replay almost any game I’d played, at least for a while. But there was no hope. It had still been fun, particularly the part where my brother had been so happy to win. I wondered if I shouldn’t have lost on purpose many times in the years past. Maybe our relationship might have had a chance to develop earlier. I didn’t truly care about the game of chess. I was just really good at playing it.

“Your brother looks pretty damned good, for an army pogue,” Puller said, his voice hoarse, the approaching pain having its effect on him too.

Masters was breathing hard so I knew he was already deep into fighting the monster. Neither Puller nor Masters had abdominal or torso wounds and it was said that those were the most painful of all, but I wasn’t so sure. It seemed to me that there was plenty of pain to go around the entirety of our small I.C.U. area.

I was relieved to have Barbara, Kathy, and Shoot (who wasn’t supposed to even be working the I.C.U.), because I knew they wouldn’t let my brother back in

until I was a few minutes into my next shot. His worry, concern, and awful attempt to accommodate my condition, had been evident by his physical reaction to my appearance. He'd been wounded himself, and God knew what his mental adjustment issues might be from his time in real combat.

My brother came back and then left again, twice more until the night came. The next morning he was back, and we got to spend two more hours before he had to leave for the airport.

I didn't want him to go. I was hanging on by my fingernails and I knew it. The surgeries were not over, and neither were some of the more dangerous tests. We'd spoken only briefly about what might be available to Mary and Julie if I didn't make it, but he'd really wanted nothing to do with such a conversation. I wished, for the life of me, that I hadn't asked him about what happened to him outside of Bien Hoa. The armored personnel carrier he was in charge of ran over a booby-trapped artillery round. Of the eleven men aboard the carrier only he had survived, and he was not that badly injured. I knew he felt bad that he'd not been hurt worse, and I also knew that was natural. I'd only done thirty days of my 13-month tour and I'd always regret the fact that I didn't serve my full time in hell. I also understood that such thinking was unreasonable, and quite possibly downright stupid. But it was real and I couldn't get around the emotion of it by applying even the best of logic.

“That’s about it for my tour,” he’d said, when his very brief and abrupt explanation was done.

I understood that his very short explanation was anything but complete, but there was not much to be said for it. After that, he closed up. There was no more smiling or any of that. I could tell that he just wanted to get out of the hospital, Japan, and back to the continental USA.

I had to live, or my wife would most probably be on her own, with the twenty thousand dollar life insurance, plus overdue pay and unused leave, of which I didn’t have very much because I’d had to use it to be on hand for Julie’s birth at Fort Sill.

With little more than a goodbye, he was gone. We’d played three chess games and he’d won them all. We didn’t discuss the enormity of his triumph before he left. He was single, although engaged to a neighbor who lived across the street from my parent’s house in Tonawanda, New York. He had his Rolex Submariner, and a load of Japanese stereo gear shipped to his next duty station in Virginia.

“Sounds like he had a bad tour,” Masters offered, when I remained silent right through the normal drug administered time, right after which I would normally have been animated and engaging in social dialogue with both men.

“I note that he didn’t ask you about your tour,” Puller said, a comment which surprised me.

“He couldn’t know anything about me or what happened in the A Shau,” I replied, trying to defend

my brother's seeming lack of interest, as to what had happened to me.

"He couldn't miss it," Masters said. "Everyone kind of knows you're Junior from the A Shau. How many officers come through this hospital where they convene a full Naval Board of Inquiry and hold it right on-premises here? My dad says none. You probably haven't guessed that you were in a private room instead of down here so they could assemble and do that."

"What if I'd died?" I asked in shock, not having had a clue that the board of inquiry might have been causal in my not receiving intensive care treatment right away. "This room was full, though," I went on.

"There are three of 'these' rooms," Masters said, "or at least so dad says."

The pain and the awfulness of what I was being told, plus the lousy ending to my brother's visit was sending me into a depressive spiral. I had nowhere to go. I had no contact with my wife. My Marines were all to hell and gone, or dead, and here I was, in some anonymous I.C.U., one of many, set away in a country where English wasn't much spoken or cared about. But I had to live. My wife and daughter needed me. Puller and Masters could not see me weaken and fall. I breathed in and out and tried to get aboard the waves of pain that were getting larger and larger as they came at me.

"My dad," Puller started out, then delayed a few seconds, before continuing, "said that he'd heard



about you and would have been proud to have had you with him at the Frozen Chosin.”

“Your dad? Chesty Puller, has heard of me?” I was shocked, awed, and deeply impressed.

I wondered then what he’d heard. Korea was a war that had never even been discussed in my whole time in the Basic School, or at the artillery school in Fort Sill. I’d fought my war at about in hundred-degree temperatures in a fetid misting rain and even more fetid stinking jungle mud. I couldn’t imagine what it might have been like to fight in the depth of winter, without proper winter equipment and against such overwhelming odds. I got aboard the waves of pain and rode. I could do it. I’d used Chesty Puller as a motivator when I’d been down in the Valley and he was now becoming my personal motivator here, strictly out of a fortune. I would meet him. He would find a way to come to his son and I’d meet Chesty Puller. I fought the pain up a swell and then rode down the other side. Fifty minutes to go. Three thousand seconds. Chesty Puller could do it. I could do it.

The days and nights came and went, although there was no descriptor other than ‘all ahead slow’ that could be applied to the time. A specific pain in my back developed. It grew worse as the days passed. Dr. Ahtai was called in, once again, because of his prowess as a cardiologist. After examining me thoroughly, he concluded that my heart was fine. The pain was caused by either gallstones or cancer of the pancreas. He called for an IVP, an intravenous dye/X-

ray test, to rule out gallstones because of my age. Twenty-three-year-old men don't usually get gallstones of sufficient size to cause such pain, or at least so the doctor said.

I was relieved to get the test because it was my first visit outside the I.C.U., and just being wheeled down the long halls felt like a form of releasing freedom. The radiology department was ready when I arrived, after a journey of only a few minutes. The technician prepared the X-Ray machine I was to be placed inside of and then injected the dye into my I.V.

"You're not allergic to iodine, by any chance, are you?" he asked, smiling down at me.

That smile was the last thing I remembered until I came back to consciousness in the I.C.U. I had no memory of my heart-stopping, the application of the life-saving paddles once again, or the return trip to rejoin Puller and Masters.

"Never a dull moment with you," Junior, Puller said.

"Glad you made it back to the room," Masters added. "We might get an even worse roommate if you'd cashed in your chips."

Shoot came through the doors and moved to stand right next to my bed. He cranked away a bit until I my upper body was propped up by about thirty degrees.

I looked down at my open exposed torso. "No wonder he threw up," I whispered to myself, although there was no whispering to oneself that was going to

escape either Puller or Masters. Neither had had any damage to their ears.

"Yeah," you're a beauty now," Puller replied as if I'd spoken to him. "You can forget about picking up the chicks down at the beach."

I looked down at my chest. The open incision extended all the way up to my breastbone, but that's not what bothered me.

Barbara walked in with Kathy following her. I knew Kathy carried my shot just by the way she conducted herself. She was bringing good news in a syringe, although I wasn't in terrible pain, even though the clock called for the injection. The shock of my cardiac arrest had somehow thrown my normal schedule into the wastebasket. But, I said nothing, not wanting to find out that the pain might be merely hiding around the corner, lurking and waiting.

"My chest hair," I murmured to Shoot, "it's gone."

"Well, not all of it," Shoot replied, pointing plaintively at a couple of patches remaining. "the higher voltages cause electrolysis,"

Barbara said, viewing the damage. "you lost much of your chest hair where the paddles were applied, but it'll grow back over time."

"You can become a weightlifter," Masters said. "They shave all their body hair when they get ready to do a posing."

"Yeah, you can be in the single-digit class, lifting seven or eight pounds at a time," Puller added. "I think your Marines called you Junior because of your

face, anyway. You look like you belong on the wall of a church or something.”

Dr. Ahtai came through the double doors, alone this time, and all conversation stopped. The severity of his plain, but meaningful, looks usually had that effect on everyone around.

“You have gallstones the size of golf balls,” he remarked, “although we won’t have a hard copy of the results until tomorrow. “Not likely, those gallstones, but better than pancreatic cancer.”

Dr. Ahtai turned around and left without further comment.

Kathy injected my I.V., and then Puller’s and Masters’ I.V.s, as well.

“You’re going to need surgery to get the gallstones out, but that’ll have to wait until you get back to CONUS,” Barbara said, using the acronym for the Continental United States instead of saying the actual words.

“Great,” I breathed out, not really concerned with surgeries that might be coming in the future. I had to pay attention to the hours, minutes, and seconds of my current existence to make it, and I well understood that. The morphine kicked in, and I felt immediately sleepy. I knew the sleepiness must have something to do with my heart stopping again, but couldn’t be sure.

“Dr. Ahtai said you could go to 3Qh, a shot every three hours if the pain gets really bad. Gall stones can cause a lot of pain, although the pain will only come from time to time.”

“When do I go home?” I asked.

“First you have to be healthy enough to be ambulatory,” Kathy replied. “We’ve got to get you up and around.”

“Fine,” I replied, “I’m ready now. I tried to sit up all the way in the bed, but then I was gone, just like that.

When I awoke again, the lights were dimmed. I’d passed out, I knew. I tried to see the rest of my chest but it was too dark. I didn’t want to lose any more hair to the paddles. Had they used them on me again? I had no idea.

“You’re awake,” a voice whispered in my left ear. It was Shoot.

“Fessman?” I asked, before catching myself. “Shoot, I mean, so sorry.”

“Who’s Fessman?” Shoot asked.

I tried to form a picture of Fessman in my mind and all that he had been, but I couldn’t do it. I was overwhelmed with who and what he’d been. I couldn’t talk so I simply laid there, tears flowing down my face. I hoped it was too dark for Shoot to see.

“I’ve been napping here, waiting for you to wake up. I’ll go now but you can always use the buzzer. He carefully placed the small cord-connected button device in my hand.

“Fessman must have been one of your guys,” he said, walking to the foot of my bed, and almost disappearing into the dimmed light. “Thanks for that compliment.”

# Chapter VII

I went on my Sippy diet a few days later, while also being proud of myself for not giving in to the morphine shots coming every three hours instead of every four. General Masters visited all the time, and even went to the extra effort of writing a letter home to my wife, or so everyone said. General Puller never made it, not while I was in the I.C.U., anyway. He was always coming but never showed up, and it really bothered his son that there was never any explanation for his not showing up as planned either. I hated the Maalox liquid medication I had to drink on the hour, but on the half-hour, I got three ounces of milk. It never tasted so good. My body processed the liquids, which led to my next transition goal, which was getting to my feet.

Shoot and Kathy sat me up, my stomach covered by 4X4s, and over those, an elastic bandage that went all the way around my torso. I was able to sit unassisted, noting that my primary pain had shifted from my abdomen to my left hip. The hip had been in nine pieces, each piece which had been drilled and then tied into the other pieces with stainless steel wire. Good fortune had allowed that my hip ball and joint had not been affected by the bullet's travel or its nearby hydrostatic effects.

Two days later I was able to get out of the bed and into a wheelchair. I made my first trip up and down the corridor with Shoot being my guide and the motive force behind me.

Barbara came to inform me that I would be leaving the I.C.U. At first, I was jubilant, leaving the I.C.U. being an indicator that I was actually likely going to live. My chart had gone to 'condition fair,' 'prognosis good,' but, if I was being okayed to be in a room or on a ward, then that was an even better indicator that I was going to make it.

Barbara motioned with her hand toward the other two beds. All of a sudden it hit me. I was leaving Puller and Masters behind. And what about Kathy and Shoot? I knew Barbara had the run of the whole hospital but I didn't think that was true of the corpsmen.

Kathy gave me a shot, but we didn't exchange much in the way of pleasantries. Shoot came and went, not saying anything either. My life was about to change again and I was, even with the warm effects of the shot hitting me, helpless to have any say in the change.

Neither Masters nor Puller said anything until Barbara, Kathy, and Shoot were gone.

"So, you're getting a transfer," Puller said, his words coming out a bit slurred and faint from the effects of the morphine. I knew his dosage must be considerably more than my own, just from the nature of his apparent injuries and the fact that he could barely talk at all ten minutes after being injected.

"Yeah," I replied, "I'm gonna miss you guys."

"Why the hell can't they just fly us straight home instead of moving us around this place?" Puller asked.

“They call it stabilization, according to Barbara,” I replied. “They want to make sure we’re going to live before they risk having us on a long plane ride where there’s no surgical equipment or proper medical staff.”

“I don’t want to go home,” Puller said.

I looked at Masters, but he turned his head to stare at the wall next to him.

I had no reply for Puller. He’d lost his legs and some other equipment. He was going home if he made it that far, an entirely different man than the one who’d left for the war only months before. He had a wife and a son. What would she, friends, and other family think of the changed man? There was nothing I could say to Puller’s statement. It hadn’t been delivered as a question. I felt relief that I had not (supposedly) been hit so badly that my injuries would be as disfiguring or as crippling as Puller’s were. My relief made me feel guilty, while at the same time bringing back worry about the extent of my injuries still unknown to me.

“I’ll come to visit as often as they let me, or I can bum a ride,” I said to both men, nodding at Puller, as Masters didn’t turn his head back to look at me.

“It don’t mean Nothin,” Puller said.

“Semper fi,” Masters whispered.

Kathy returned with another shot. I didn’t realize she was there until I felt her working on the I.V. bar, getting the wheels unlocked and ready for the move. I’d somehow nodded off, even with the pain.

“You gave me a shot while I was asleep,” I said, surprised, not being able to figure out why a pain shot



would be administered to someone who's basically unconscious.

"You're moving, and you haven't been up and around for some time," Barbara replied. "Your abdomen is held together by steel stitches and your hip with all that wire, so we should have no problem except for the pain, and hence the shot. You ready?"

The move was a blur of tumbling images and rolling discomfort, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The light bars evenly spaced on the ceiling of all the halls passed like beacons of success. I wondered, in some protected corner of my mind, if Kathy hadn't upped the dosage of my pain medication a bit to put me nearly out.

When I awoke from the effects of the shot, I was settled into a regular wardroom, moved to a 'Sippy Two' diet, according to Barbara, so I could have Gerber's baby custard every half hour, along with the Maalox and milk. My colostomy was a nasty piece of surgical work, in that the clear plastic bag sat right off to the left side of my torso. I couldn't imagine what it would be doing when I was taking in and eliminating solid food. The doctor had indicated that my next surgery would be targeted at going in to make sure all the other surgery had gone well, and then to close the colostomy. He had also mentioned that some people had to keep the awful contraption for the rest of their life. I couldn't bear to think about living long with that thing on my body.

My first trip out of the room was exploratory, with Shoot pushing me along down the hall outside my room.

My next trip, when I could make it on my own, would include a visit to Captain Johnson's room. That was the name of the hospital's wildest character, located along the hall, according to both his chart and what Shoot said. He was a living legend among the staff, and I'd heard his name and circumstance discussed several times. His room was closer to the end of the corridor than my own.

Time passed, more slowly than before because I was alone, except for visits by Barbara, Kathy, and Shoot.

Very slowly, and agonizingly, I knew I could make my way down the full length of the wing corridor. I'd been moved out of the I.C.U. to my own room onto a regular ward only five days before, and I was still feeling the loss of Puller and Masters. I'd talked to them endlessly about stuff I couldn't remember, as I was quite communicable during the first hour and a half, or so, after getting a pain shot. My constant I.C.U. bedmates had provided more therapy to me than I'd really understood until they weren't there anymore. I knew from moving around that I'd be a long time in being able to get back to visit them on my own. Kathy let me work my way along, on the fifth day, catheter bag tied to my leg, I.V. on top of a wheeled stalk, wearing shower shoes, hospital tied pajamas, and a Navy-Blue robe. Shoot had toured me through the hospital in a wheelchair that first day so I

wouldn't get lost when it came time to go on my own, or so he said. I smiled at that because I couldn't remember making the trip at all.

The Naval Hospital was a simply constructed set of seven long rows of rather slim buildings. Each building had a corridor that stretched from one end to the other. In the very center of each building was a single connecting hallway that allowed passage from one long building to another. Both Puller and Masters were in orthopedic I.C.U. which was in the third row. My new room was in row seven, in the part everyone called 'dirty surgery.' It was a great distance, for me, from row three. All the buildings were two-story, although the second story of each row was mostly occupied with staff living space, special equipment, and storage. We, the patients, occupied the first-floor space in all the buildings.

I hobbled, or staggered my way along, going from one side of the corridor to the other, in order to gain stability, rest, and then move on. The showers were at the end of the corridor. I so wanted my first shower, and to make sure that I could walk again that I refused to use the wheelchair being pushed behind me. A new corpsman, one probably assigned to replace Shoot, with the unlikely last name of Pustinger, moved slowly along, stopping as often as I did. I wasn't going anywhere alone, I realized. Either the doctor, Kathy, or Barbara had made certain of that. I made slow progress, with my wired back-together hip in pain, but I was moving. Pustinger's name badge was a shortened form of his full name. It

read only "PUS." Nobody laughed or commented on his name, so I said nothing about how weird it was to have such a name when working on a surgical floor that was called 'dirty surgery.'

"They're not going to like you walking without crutches," Pus said quietly. "The nurse ordered you to sit in the wheelchair because your hip is a long way from being healed. Bones don't heal fast."

"Really," I replied, between breaths. "What they gonna do send me back to the Nam?"

"I don't know, they'll probably punish me instead, I mean, if they find out."

"I recommend that we don't tell them," I said, although I knew that almost nothing got by anyone on the floor, or quite possibly, in the whole hospital. The place was a nest of rumor, loose talk, and the passing of every bit of information that could be gleaned from anyone.

Captain Johnson's room was exactly halfway to the showers, so I stopped there and entered his room. The door was propped open.

Shoot was always frustrated and sometimes disgusted by him, I knew. Johnson had been hit in the head with something, along with taking a bullet through his left shoulder. He'd had successful surgery on the wounds, but was waiting for the repair of his damaged, addled mind to catch up with the healing of his body. Somehow, after being hit, and then returned to consciousness following surgery, he'd come to believe that he was Stonewall Jackson, still fighting in the Civil War. An officer friend of his had brought

Johnson some black riding boots, which Shoot was required to put on him every morning and then take off every night. During the night Shoot also had to polish the boots.

“Inadequate, impertinent and incompetent,” were words that were constantly being shouted out by Johnson, with respect to Shoot’s inability to pull his boots off successfully and also because Shoot didn’t know much about how to polish the leather to a Marine Corps grade of a spit shine.

I entered the room and sat down, as lightly as I could on the single cushioned chair next to his bed. I could not sit on anything without cushioning and, even with that, could not sit for long.

“Good morning, General Jackson,” I said, easing myself gently around the seat of the chair in order to cradle my damaged hip as much as possible.

The orthopedic doctor claimed that the many feet of stainless-steel wire they’d knit the pelvic pieces back together with was so strong, after twelve days, or so, of healing, that the joint could easily handle walking, although my gait would be different, possibly for the rest of my life. I didn’t completely trust the doctor’s opinion, mostly because of what could happen if he was wrong. Another major surgery might just kill me. I knew I had serious surgeries ahead of me, one of which, the colostomy closure, I was looking forward to, but those seemed so far ahead that it was like considering a different life rather than the one I was currently stuck in. I was afraid to risk anything by trying too hard, but I was also frightened

that I would not go home and recover to be much like my old self.

“How is it that a cripple like you, Corporal, is the only one in this God-forsaken encampment who calls me by my proper title?” Johnson asked me, his ‘general’s’ voice echoing around the room, as well as out into the corridor.

“How’s your head?” I asked back since there was still a white bandage wrapped around his forehead, tied off with a big square knot.

There was no questioning the captain’s comment. My rank had been reduced to Corporal the first second he’d laid eyes on me the day before. Shoot had been there, whispering from behind me: “don’t argue,” he’d said. I didn’t argue, being glad that I’d not been hit in the head too.

“This is Indian crap,” Johnson bellowed, moving the gauze slightly with the fingers of his right hand, “they think I should be wearing a feather on my head.”

His hand was covered in red crisscrossing scars, but it seemed to work without much difficulty. My own hand had been hurt, as well, and my brother’s too. What was it with hands in combat, I wondered.

“What was your greatest battle in that war?” I asked, already knowing what his answer would be since I’d made the first experimental shower trip the day before. I’d made the trip just to make sure I could. Today was my first time I was making it on my own two feet, however, without Shoot forcing me into a chair and pushing me along. I hadn’t showered the day before but now would do my best to accomplish

that mission. For some reason, I craved an actual shower, with hot water cascading down around me, even if I couldn't bend over to soap up.

"Gettysburg," Johnson intoned, his voice dropping very noticeably in volume. "Our worst defeat, but boy did we give it to them that day. Killing so many of us took the heart right out of them Federalists."

The 'general' sat atop his covers, the angle of the top one-third of his bed cranked to allow him to sit straight up, his boots extended out in front of him.

"That cursed Private Shoot, weird name, can't shine boots worth a damn," Johnson went on, changing the subject.

I knew he wasn't changing the subject because of a lack of detail about Gettysburg, as my previous visit he'd demonstrated brilliant details of almost every facet of that pivotal Civil War battle. So, I waited, wondering what was going on inside his damaged cranium, and what he might want to talk about but couldn't bring himself. I realized that his brain injury was actually a more merciful result than Puller had been given.

After a few minutes of silence, Captain Johnson sighed, adjusted the bandage covering his shoulder with his other arm and turned to look at me.

"You're dismissed Corporal," he said. "You may return, however, as I will be in the area all day."

My 'audience' was over.

I painfully got up and moved to the open door, turning back to salute the make-believe general with

my right hand, which he didn't return. I shuffled out into the corridor where Pus waited.

The rest of my journey was made without incident. I was beginning to realize why Kathy had given me a pain shot when I'd made the move out of the I.C.U. but would not give me shots before I traveled the halls on my own. She wanted me to avoid injury by limiting the time and travel I spent out of the bed. Even with the shower standing open in the small locker room, I was torn about getting the shower or heading back to get a shot. The pain was growing and I was in the last hour of its crushing and disabling grip.

The shower was everything. Pus, much quieter and less expressive than Shoot was, however, a wonderful bath attendant. I had to shower with my 'tie-in-the-back hospital shirt on, but Pus had brought an extra. My abdomen was still pretty much open in its outside layers, while the wound stitches closing the other openings in my torso had yet to be removed. Shoot told me I had seven other openings of one kind or another, but I wasn't yet aware of them all. The cut on my hand made manipulating clothing, and just about everything else, almost impossible, without assistance. Pus was that assistance, seeming to know just what I needed even before I knew I needed it. I took the longest shower of my life, shampooing my hair three times. I had no conditioner, but my hair was so short, in Marine Officer trim, that it really wasn't necessary.



After the shower, I was so relaxed, and so in pain at the same time, that I accepted Pus' offer of the wheelchair. Pus wheeled me quickly, but firmly.

As we were about to pass Captain Johnson's still open door I heard his gravelly yell: "Corporal," he shouted.

Pus stopped pushing instantly, nearly catapulting me forward and off the chair. I recovered as Pus turned through the door and pushed me inside the room. Quickly, he stepped backward and out in the hall to wait.

"That was your favorite?" I asked back, not being very aware of Civil War history. I'd only asked the question to pander to the damaged patient and pass the time.

"That's an entirely different question that you asked before," Johnson replied, all of a sudden very cogent and clear.

"You just came from a war, didn't you?" he went on, stunning me. We'd instantly moved from the Civil War to Vietnam. "Did you have a favorite battle?"

My mind stopped suddenly, the pain through all of my body growing but my need to consider the enormity of the question and the obvious answer would not let me call Pus to get me back to my room.

"No," I replied, my mind going straight to the A Shau Valley, and battle after battle until the last brutal killing battle. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the cascade of thoughts. I hadn't thought about any of it, my thoughts all concentrated on getting home, getting out of pain, and fighting to live and recover.

“Antietam might fit in there, although I don’t have a real answer. We lost 23,000 that day alone.”

I remained totally silent, unable to speak.

“Thought not,” Johnson continued. “Antietam rhymes with Vietnam or someplace like that,” Johnson intoned. “Get Shoot in here with some boot polish.”

Pus pulled me backward out of the room without any instruction from me. I had to get to my room and he somehow had guessed that. I had to get the shot. I couldn’t think through the awful thoughts and images coursing through my brain. Somehow, the general’s simple come back of a question had allowed the pain in my mind to overcome the pain coiling and churning inside my body.

Pus helped me to bed and then called the nursing station. Kathy appeared in less than a minute, her hand holding a syringe with the yellow morphine visible inside its clear glass cylinder.

“Did you hit something?” She demanded of Pus, “or did he fall?”

“No, not at all.” Pus replied, holding out both hands before grabbing the wheelchair and backing it toward the door.

“Then why’s he crying?” Barbara asked, her voice hard and tough.

The liquid went in. My eyes closed before it was possible for the live-giving drug to hit my system. But I was gone. Gone from the pain, from the hospital and gone from the A Shau Valley.

## Chapter VIII

I was awakened by the pain and by the noises being emitted from within my room. I stared over at the figures of Pus, Kathy and Barbara, gathered together as they worked to set up an additional bed and get all the connections correct. Barbara was the first to notice that I was awake.

“How was your shower?” she asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before going on, “and, you’re getting a new roommate. I know it must be hard to be in a room alone, after the kind of relationship you established with the other two lieutenants you were with.”

I didn’t reply, my relief at not being back in the A Shau overpowering my communications ability. I breathed in and out deeply. I was okay. I was in Japan. Nobody was coming for me. I looked over at the big clock placed up above the bed they were assembling, and then up at the television mounted high up on the wall in front of me. Would the mysterious new roommate argue over what channel to watch? I smiled at my own unintentional humor. It was all Japanese television. Channels didn’t matter, as there were also no subtitles to any of them. The clock was mounted on the wall, which placed it high above where the new patient would be ensconced. I’d have to look at the guy every time I wanted to see how much time had passed, which meant I’d be

looking over at him often. I was one hour from another shot, I saw, glancing at the clock.

A one-armed man was wheeled into the room, the chair pushed by Shoot.

The man was handsome but his facial features were mildly contorted in such a way that it took a lot away from his strong-featured appearance.

"This is Lieutenant Rory King," Barbara introduced, waving her left arm in a needless gesture to alert me of the new patient's arrival.

The man in the wheelchair didn't look over at me, his eyes fixed on the bed.

"When's the next pain shot?" he asked but didn't seem to direct the question at anyone.

"Let's get you into the bed," Barbara said, ignoring the lieutenant's question.

Without any delay Kathy, Shoot and Pus surrounded the man, lifted him bodily, as if his wounds were to his legs instead of one arm, and eased him up and then over the higher edge of the bed.

"I can do this myself," Rory said, his tone surly and low.

Everyone stood back as he eased himself around and then came slowly to a sitting position, with his butt on the bed, his back to the wall.

"Unless you have a shot for me, you can all get the hell out," he whispered, looking at each person in the room one by one, except for me.

"Okay, then, our work is done here," Barbara replied, heading for the door.

"You're not due for an injection for another three hours," Kathy said.

"Sir," Rory stated, looking Kathy in the eyes.

"Sir," Kathy muttered, before turning to follow Barbara out the door, followed by Pus. The wheelchair remained next to Rory's bed. Pus gently closed the door upon leaving, his look through the closing crack not missed by me. I was being left with a problematic patient and Pus was sorry about that. That I had been so effective and popular with Puller and Masters hadn't been ignored by the medical staff.

"What's your rank?" Rory asked, looking over at me for the first time.

"Second Lieutenant," I replied, knowing what was coming next.

"So, you can call me sir, too. I have the rank that is equivalent to your service's designation of a captain."

"Okay, captain," I replied. "My men called me Junior down in the valley so I guess you can call me whatever you want."

"Yeah, I heard something about that," Rory said. "Not the best of tours. Me either."

Rory turned his body gently around and then laid down on the bed, his head in the very exact center of his pillow.

"They didn't turn up the bed," Rory complained. "I need some angle to this thing and don't call me captain. That's a much higher rank in the Navy."

"The button's on the left side of your bed, to call them, I mean," I replied, not knowing how to address the difficult man.

"Left side, very funny," he replied.

The naval officer was missing his left arm, I suddenly realized. I pulled my thick-wired control unit to my side and pushed the button for assistance. Pus appeared within seconds.

"Angle the head of this bed up, Snuffy," Rory said.

"Yes, sir," Pus answered, going to the head of the bed to operate the crank located there. He cranked away until Rory told him to stop, and then he was gone, nearly running out of the room.

"They're a great crew, you know, the people working here," I said, unable to stop myself. "They called me Junior in the valley and now you're calling the corpsman Snuffy. Neither of those two nicknames were or are complimentary. You lost your arm, and that's got to be terrible. I'm not even certain yet what parts I've permanently lost, but I sure as hell know it's not the fault of this team of medical people. Don't call the corpsman Snuffy again, at least not in my presence."

"Sir," Rory hissed back. "And just what in the hell do you think, from your own mess of a bed, that you can do to control anything I do?"

"I'm friends with important people, but you're correct, sir, that I can't do much. Maybe all I can do is call my friend, the Navy Captain of this hospital, and make certain that you don't get a pain shot in three

hours, or any more, since obviously, they're giving you morphine to help accommodate your mental, rather than, your physical state."

"Who the hell are you?" Rory exclaimed, looking directly over at me. "Where's this valley you keep mentioning? And why are you defending enlisted naval staff who are required to do our bidding? We're both officers and combat-experienced officers at that."

"And..." I replied, almost instantly.

"And," the naval lieutenant replied, looking away from me, "please don't stop the shots. They're all I've got right now. They're sending me to Bethesda Naval Hospital from here, but I can't go there, and nobody will listen. My wife, down in Amarillo, Texas needs me back badly, and I can't seem to get anyone to understand just how badly I need to get back to her. I don't have an arm anymore. She may not want me."

Rory held out his small stub of an arm, to illustrate his condition.

I looked at the man and my sympathy went out towards him. "So, you're worried that she won't want you anymore because of the arm?"

Rory looked at me, his answer to the question fully delivered by his facial expression alone.

I noted that the Navy Lieutenant had not required that I call him sir again.

"We need Barbara," I replied.

"Barbara who?" Rory asked.

"Barbara 'I'm getting you to Amarillo' Barbara, that's who," I replied, as I hit the button on my electronic unit for assistance, again.

I had no idea what I was doing, but ever since I'd heard Barbara was not just some anonymous volunteer at the hospital, that her husband was the commanding officer of the whole place, I'd treated her gingerly, with respect, as well as a low level of fear.

Pus came into the room, his response time astoundingly fast, but he stood uncommonly at the door, avoiding looking over at the Lieutenant.

"I need to talk to Barbara," I said, and then stopped talking.

Pus looked over at the Navy Lieutenant finally and meaningfully, no doubt thinking, I realized, that I was probably trying to find a way to bail out of the room they'd put the more than difficult Navy Officer in. Pus left, but I knew it wouldn't be long before he returned with Barbara or she came alone.

Barbara was there within minutes. I wondered if she remained on her 'volunteer' hours all day and all night long, and what area of the hospital was she assigned to, as she always seemed to be nearby and it was a very large hospital.

I explained the situation Rory was trying to live through, as best I could. Rory didn't comment at any time or interrupt at all.

"I'll see what I can do," Barbara said, before leaving.

"Thank you," Rory said, but I couldn't glean any sincerity from his tone or the use of the words.

"Think nothing of it, and I don't have any idea whether she can pull it off," I replied.



“I meant, thank you for trying...after the way I was a bit ago.”

My shot came on time and then Rory's, both delivered by Kathy early, as the pain management system set up and efficiently operated by Yokosuka Naval Hospital worked to perfection, with slight modifications and changes worked in by the staff.

Rory looked over at me meaningfully, as if I was the one who'd got him the morphine, but I'd had nothing to do with it. Kathy was sensitive, crisp, cool, and brilliantly able to understand the wants, needs, and attitudes of her patients.

I faded away with the shot, knowing I'd have another coming in the middle of the night. The Navy Lieutenant had nothing to say, once receiving his own injection of pain medication.

I awoke in the morning, having remembered the morphine shot in the middle of the night, but not thinking much about everything else that transpired. I looked over at the Navy Lieutenant's bed but the bed was empty.

I pushed the button for attention.

My feelings ran from being happy for the Navy Lieutenant to my own sense of strange alienation from having 'lost' another member of my company, even though he'd never been anywhere near where I'd served. I couldn't even remember his last name, my near eidetic memory not working at all, just as it didn't seem to when I thought about the guys in the company, or exactly where the A Shau part of the valley I worked back and forth across was in relation

to the rest of the country. It was north of most of the south, it was west from the ocean but I couldn't picture just how it fit in with how'd I'd come to be there or even how An Hoa or Da Nang fit in.

I half-walked down the hall toward the single shower stall, more interested in looking out the window than having the shower itself. Pus was there with the wheelchair and I accepted a ride halfway down the hall. Following my hot hard water shower, I was refreshed to the bottom of my being, however. I remembered the life-giving power of the Bong Song when I'd been able to swim in it. Water could be magical in its healing power. Why there was a window low enough for me to see out of in the wing's only shower, was based on a logic I couldn't comprehend. Who looked out of a shower window when they were washing and rinsing down? I did, but I also knew I wasn't normal by any stretch of any definition I could think of. I'd once been normal and wanted to be again, but whatever state I was in was different than that, although I couldn't quite put my finger on the details of just how. The snow had been coming down outside when I'd visited the shower days earlier. It'd been heartwarming to observe, although Japan in winter was a very cold place I knew, and that weather was only inches from my view.

I was so tired out from the staggering, brushing and bouncing-off-walls travel from my room to the shower that I accepted Pus's offer of a full free ride in the chair on the way back.

We passed Captain Jackson's room quickly. I forced Pus to stop, just beyond the uncommonly closed door. It had been closed when we passed it earlier, I realized.

"Let's visit the general," I said, forcing Pus to turn the chair around.

"He's not there," Pus said, placing my chair right exactly outside the center of the door.

"They shipped him out," Pus said, his voice low, nearly unheard.

"Oh," I replied, shocked that nobody had said anything about his leaving.

"Where's home for him?" I asked.

"They didn't ship him home," Pus said, his voice sounding like he was filled with misery and regret.

"Where did they send him?" I asked, imaging the many hospitals connected to the Naval operations medical system.

"They cleared him and sent him back to Vietnam," Pus said.

Thoughts of crazy apparitions blasted into my mind. General Jackson flying a helicopter over the enemy in Vietnam. Johnson forcing his subordinates at some base to get his boots on and keep them polished."

"How could they have sent him back," I asked in amazement, but Pus didn't reply. I knew they simply couldn't have sent him back in his condition, but deep down in my heart of hearts, I knew they had.

"Who came to interview him?" I asked, anger beginning to replace the grief I was feeling.

“There was no interview,” Pus replied, wheeling me along toward my room. “He was determined, from the medical reports, to be serviceable as an officer and pilot, and okay to serve out the remainder of his tour. There’s no place on the report for a mental condition.”

I made the trip back to my room in silence. Johnson was a dead man and I could not save him. The people with him on any Huey he flew would be dead too, but I couldn’t save them either. I was reminded of the crew that the colonel had sent out in the night to investigate me, and the terrible KIA numbers coming from my units in the A Shau. They didn’t know. There was no way they could know because the system was not set up to let the rear areas know what was really happening in the field, or even in the hospitals they operated.

Pus helped me get back in bed. I waited for him to leave since unlike Shoot, he didn’t stay inside the room all the time. That was a good sign, I knew but at the moment couldn’t reflect on that thought.

I pushed the button for help.

Kathy appeared in less than two minutes, as I looked at my big clock on the wall, Rory gone, gone like so many in the period of my life I was living.

“It’s too early for your next shot,” she said, looking down to check her watch.

I didn’t reply, merely looking away, as I was not surprised. I knew the schedule of shots better than any nurse might.

“They sent Captain Jackson back to Vietnam,” I said, not wanting to meet her eyes.

“Yes, I heard that,” Kathy answered, before turning and leaving through the room’s double doors. She reappeared in minutes, a syringe in her hand.

“This one’s on the house,” she said, plunging the needle into my I.V tubing.

“There’s nothing right about any of this,” she said, tossing the syringe into the medical disposal box.

I didn’t reply, as there was no reply necessary. I was still in combat and there was no rational ability to conduct almost any social or structured action in a combat situation. The combat area and its effects structured everything. Anyone within the surrounding area of its effect reacted, and, mostly died.

“What about Barbara?” I asked. Barbara had single-handedly saved Rory and got him back to be with his wife.

“Orders,” Kathy replied. “Neither she nor her husband can change or affect Marine orders in a combat zone. I know you’re thinking about Rory, but that was different. He already had orders sending him home. They don’t change orders given out when you’re still part of the combat team in actual conflict.”

I wanted to ask questions, like who had certified the man to be okay to not only continue active service but return to full-on combat service, but I knew it was hopeless. Combat zones, even in rear areas and supporting operations like the Yokosuka Naval Hospital, functioned in a state of managed chaos. I’d

gone to Tachikawa Air Force Hospital because my file had been stamped M.C. and the people transporting me thought that meant Medical Corps instead of Marine Corps. That fact might have been bad enough alone, but instead of treating and stabilizing me they'd immediately dumped my grievously wounded, likely dying, body into a jeep and driven me to another hospital. Managed chaos, the same kind of nightmare logic that ruled life and death at the bottom of the A Shau Valley survived insidiously throughout the war arena. Johnson was as good as dead, like Sugar Daddy, Fessman and so many of the rest, and there wasn't one thing I could do about it. He'd gone back into the charnel house of violent death.

I knew I couldn't make it the distance over to see Puller and Masters. There was no way they were going back into combat, not with fathers who were general officers in the Corps.

The morphine hit me before I could feel even worse. I liked the man playing at being Stonewall Jackson. I wondered before I went out, whether it would be different when I got to a hospital back in the Continental U.S. and, for the first time since being hit, also wondered if I too might somehow be patched back together and sent, once again, into the valley. My dad was only a warrant officer in the Coast Guard.

## Chapter IX

I watched Japanese television. I didn't understand almost any of it, but Shoot had clued me in, early on, that the Japanese had no qualms about showing bare female breasts on their regular programming. That part of Japanese television was okay. Rory had come and gone so quickly I hadn't gotten used to having a roommate, so the solitary nature of my stay was only broken by the fact that Shoot and Pus dropped by all the time while Kathy and Barbara were always around too.

One morning, the morning of my fourth week at the Hospital, I received my first visitor, I mean following the board of inquiry that had shown up so long ago when I was brand new. This visitor was another Marine Officer who was 'stopping through' on his way through. There was a nearby Bachelor Officers Quarters at Yokosuka where many stayed until they could tie-up with the flight home they needed. The officer named Bob White spent a couple of hours with me as if he was trying to bring me out of some depression, or something. He had a ton of questions about my time in the A Shau Valley since he'd never made it into combat.

Over the next three days, I received three more visitors of the same ilk. I did the best I could to be hospitable, and since they only came right after I'd had a shot, I was sociable and polite. Nobody could answer my questions about why these officers were

coming to see me or even how they knew about me at all until Barbara came in while the last officer was with me. When he left, I asked her the same questions?

"You don't have a clue, do you?" she asked, sitting down in the only extra chair in my room, something she'd never done before.

"About what?" I asked, perplexed.

"They know you over at the BOQ, so the officers there come to visit," she replied.

"For what?" I asked, baffled. "Why me, although it's awful nice of them."

"None of them were in combat," Barbara said.

"So?" was all I could think to reply.

"They're going home," Barbara said, in a tone that seemed to indicate there was something she both wanted and didn't want to say.

"Okay, I got that," I responded, becoming a bit frustrated and also exasperated with where our discussion seemed to be going because I could not figure out any logic to any of it.

"They're going home, and they need your stories," she finally said. "You are completely open about everything that happened. They want to be able to tell your stories to their family, friends, and relatives."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, still not getting it.

"They're going home to tell the stories as if they happened to them, not you." She said, slowly getting up out of the chair. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell you. Do you still want visitors?"



I slowly shook my head, the information she'd given me seeming to take my breath away.

"Thanks for what you did for Rory," I said, quickly trying to cover just how hard her revelation had hit me.

"It's okay, that was a really nice thing to be a part of and it was really great that you told me, but I couldn't help with Captain Johnson. I'm so sorry." She turned and headed for the door. "You want Kathy to bring you an injection?"

"No, I'm okay," I lied. The pain hadn't climbed to its fourth-hour level yet, but the pain I felt from the seeming violation of my brother officers stung deeply, all the same, and somehow, she knew that.

The visit back to the I.C.U. room I'd left Puller and Masters was to be eventful, in that I went with so much company. For whatever reasons, word had come down that General Masters was making a special effort to see me when I got there. Both he and the staff seemed to feel that my talks with the lieutenants had been definitively helpful in keeping both of them alive long enough for their bodies to be healed enough to survive. I didn't see it that way. I knew I'd talked because I couldn't shut up when it came to the vast assortment of short stories that had formed my tour. Alice in Wonderland, having gone down into the rabbit hole, had only reached an imagined underworld, created by a genius, not an expert or participant in visiting underworlds. I'd been to the real underworld and now that I was removed from it could only come to grasp what had happened

by telling others about it, although I could only truly open up with guys who'd been shot or wounded in other ways like me.

"Your entourage is getting noticed," Barbara said, as others traveling through the long halls moved aside for my chair, with Shoot pushing and Pus and Kathy clearing the way. There was no way I could have made the trip on my own two feet since the distance of my longest travel was to the shower, and then, after showering, taking a rest, before staggering back to my room.

I felt the effects of the morphine as we moved along the corridor before getting to the I.C.U. I looked up at Kathy and asked her a question that hadn't occurred to me before.

"How long can I keep taking morphine-like this without becoming an addict?"

"You're already an addict, or what we in your medical team prefer to call dependent, but we'll worry about taking care of the drug stuff later. It doesn't matter right now," she replied as if I should have known about what she was saying in the first place.

"Why doesn't it matter?" I asked, not truly understanding her reply.

"Because without the morphine you'd have died, may still die, so being dependent wouldn't have mattered if you hadn't made it."

I understood the answer, and didn't like it, but said nothing further as we'd reached the double doors leading into the I.C.U. As I was pushed through the opening, I was shocked. There was another room

outside of the intensive care unit. I looked all around. How could I be so wrong about something? Those double doors had swung open so many times to reveal patients and personnel scurrying by when I was laying in my bed. It struck me hard that I couldn't possibly have seen other people walking by. I'd hallucinated them. What else had I hallucinated?

I smiled artificially as General Masters stood to one side, a big grin on his face.

"We've been expecting you," he said, bending down to pat me on the shoulder with his right hand, his barracks cover tucked neatly under his other arm. When my brother had visited, wearing his Army uniform, he'd worn his cover inside. Only the Marine Corps required all personnel unless under arms, to remain uncovered, and hence did not salute one another indoors either.

We spent only about twenty minutes together in the room. Kathy kept checking with me to see how I was doing, knowing the morphine was wearing off but not wanting to end the positive session. It ended minutes later but in an unexpected way. Master's son asked if everyone, including his father, could leave the room for a few minutes, except for me. I was surprised but didn't know what to make of such a strange request.

After everyone was gone, the Navy Lieutenant told me what it was they wanted. I was able to get out of my chair but only turned to slowly push it back out through the double doors. Once the doors swung

shut, I got back in the chair. General Masters was gone, as was Pus.

“What was that all about?” Shoot asked entering from the outside hall, gripping the handles of the chair, and then heading me back to my own room where my small amount of collected gear was waiting.

I couldn’t answer his question. I owed him an answer, but it would have been an answer I’d totally have had to fabricate, and he didn’t deserve that. I gave him only silence for a minute, before looking over at Kathy, accompanying us, and asking her about the coming flight.

“The flight will be a little over ten-hours, with the C-141 Starlifter stopping once in Alaska to refuel,” Kathy replied, holding up a syringe to check the yellow level of the glass tube’s contents, “So I’m not hitting you with this until you’re actually inside the fuselage. They’ll keep you mostly out for the entire trip until you reach Travis. They tell me your wife will be there to meet you too.”

“Mostly?” I asked. “What does mostly mean?”

“Stop worrying,” Kathy replied, exasperation in her voice. “I care, they care, we all care...so don’t think you’re flying alone or without a whole lot of that care surrounding you during the ride.”

It was true. I was paranoid about the pain, as I’d been about the terror back down in the valley. Two horrid kinds of nearly unbearable pain, but at least the physical injury causing pain was dulled by the morphine. I couldn’t argue at all that great care had not been given to me. I should not have made it

through the night of the first of October, and I wouldn't have without extraordinary care. Dr. North had saved my life and so many others who I didn't, and would never, know. Once more I was also about to leave behind those who'd been so necessary and personally important to my survival. Would I ever see any of them again? Most of my Marines were gone and the few of them who'd made it were gone somewhere I knew nothing about. Would I ever see them again? Nobody said anything about such things, or at least they hadn't so far, and I was about to get aboard the 'Starlifter' and head up and out into another part of my life if I lived. Those last three words had somehow become part of my mantra of life, often mentioned by others around me. Would I ever be able to drop them from my thought?

The gurney was a light-wheeled model. It had thin padding, and its little axles needed grease. Both corpsmen wheeled me along, Shoot in the back and Pus leading the way. Kathy had gone on ahead and would meet us at the plane after she counseled with the medical team assigned to take care of us during the flight.

The lights set horizontally across the ceiling of the hall were spaced about twenty feet apart. I lay flat on my back, the pain starting to edge its way back up from wherever it was pushed down by the morphine. The lights flitted by like super-white chicklets, there soft-edged rectangular shapes seeming to go off, as I passed under them, more like gentle passing flashbulbs than the constant lights they really were.

Sensing my drug-diminished but still distressed state, both Shoot, and Pus used gentle platitudes about how I was going to all right. Both argued that if I wasn't stable and likely to live then the hospital would never release, much less transport, me to somewhere else. I sighed, trying to accommodate the meaning and emotion behind the words. It had been mere weeks since the Medical Corps at Tachikawa Air Force Base Hospital had released me in worse than critical condition and sent me to Yokosuka in a jeep manned by just a driver and no medical equipment whatsoever.

The gurney was wheeled outside the hospital and I felt the whole rig being spirited quickly up a ramp. Shoot settled me atop the gurney, checking to see that the straps they used to stabilize me for the trip were secure, and then securing two legs of the gurney to the bed of the truck. I realized we were in the bed of a six-by, the most common supply vehicle of the Marine Corps, and not inside an ambulance, which brought a question to my mind, but I didn't get a chance to ask it.

"A bunch of guys are going home on the Starlifter, so transportation was limited," Kathy said, sitting on a bench across from me.

Shoot sat down to join her. The back ramp leading up to the truck's bed was removed and the gate slammed shut.

The deuce and a half pulled away, noisy and slow, like all six-bys I'd ever been in, but the trip to the airport, and then out onto the tarmac, took only

minutes. The truck never stopped until reaching the plane, which I didn't know was the plane until someone outside pulled down the gate, replaced the ramp. Shoot wheeled me down to the asphalt below. The giant Starlifter loomed above, like the great body of some huge whale, a whale with giant wings.

Barbara was there to say goodbye, as was Pus, but there was someone else. I craned my head around to try to see better, under the two big jet engines that hung down from the plane's big wing, itself distinctive. The wing looked like it was part of some 'hunchback' airplane configuration. The image looked strange but also suggestively powerful, like the shoulders of some defensive linebacker in football.

A shadowy figure lurked near one of the Starlifter's big wheels, not hiding but not showing much of himself, either. It was impossible not to recognize the figure because he'd almost always appeared the same when emerging from the background bracken and debris of the lower canopy of the jungle. It was Nguyen.

I tried to see into his impenetrable eyes, but the light was bad, and the distance was too great. I watched him shake his head slowly back and forth like he'd only done a few times since I'd come to know him. I tried to figure out his message, but nothing would come to me, and then he was gone.

I turned my head back. Quickly, the good-byes over, I was unstrapped from the gurney and eased into a net of some sort. Kathy came over and injected a syringe needle into the nexus of my I.V. rig plastic.

“You’re going to do fine,” she said, with a great smile, “I just know it.”

I was lifted into the air and then swept immediately into the darker inside cavity of the plane’s fuselage. Once there, a team of busy people took over and moved me, inside my netting, forward along the right side of the metal-plated floor.

“Okay, here we are,” a woman’s voice said. “You’ll ride in this special place for the whole trip, but you won’t be aware of much at all. I’ll be out here with my team to take care of your every need. Your I.V. is set and external for service, your colostomy bag okay because you’re not on solids yet, and the catheter bag should cover you for the whole trip.”

The web was removed, and hands gripped me all over. I felt myself slipping into what I came to call a cocoon. In seconds I was inside a plastic bag, and it was being attached to the right wall of the plane’s fuselage. I was going to fly inside a bag. The only good part was I could see through the plastic, but the drug was starting to hit me, and I knew I wouldn’t be seeing much for very long. I wasn’t afraid, the drug helping with that too, I just didn’t want to be alone.

The plane’s engines started, their whine rising and rising in shrill synchrony until we began to move. The drug kicked in more fully, and the next thing I really felt was the acceleration and rising up of the Starlifter from the airport tarmac.

I was going home if I lived.

I lay inside my plastic cocoon, supposedly unconscious. What they’d given me had been more



than morphine I knew, just from the effect, and there would no doubt be additional doses until we reached Travis Air Force Base. But there was something more powerful than the drug that would not let me sink into unconsciousness.

I'd spent many hours with both Puller and Masters and I'd thought that I had a pretty good understanding of them, as well as a brothers-in-arms depth of friendship with both. That they'd not understood and internalized the stories I'd poured out to them more than disappointed me. It went to the very core of the soul I was attempting to rebuild. That their expectation of my taking action under and after the circumstances I so recently had come through and was trying, with what was left of my heart, to overcome and recover from, was shocking. I tried not to twist and turn inside my plastic bag. I didn't want any more drugs. I didn't want the drugs either. I didn't want to die. But I didn't really want to live anymore either.

I worked to think my way through. I tried to image my wife and daughter who were waiting for me at Travis, but the images of both were blurry like they'd never been before.

One figure's image came through all the fog of the drug, and the emotional nightmare I'd faced inside the I.C.U. room. It was Nguyen. He'd come to see me off, to protect me one last time. He'd shaken his head slowly like we were still down in the valley, which in some ways, I wondered if we wouldn't always be. What was his message? Then an unlikely possibility

occurred to me. It was like he'd been in the I.C.U. room with Puller, Masters, and I for the conversation.

"Stop telling your stories," I whispered, a dim light seeming to go off way down deep in my brain. But I only said the words to myself. My right elbow unconsciously poked outward into the plastic.

"You okay in there?" a muffled voice asked, only inches away, on the other side of the plastic 'wall' of my cocoon.

The men visiting me from the BOQ had wanted my stories to take home and then tell as their own. That should not have bothered me, and the act of them telling my stories as their own really didn't. What bothered me was the deception buried deep down at the foundation of their visits, and my foolishness in not being able to penetrate the deception.

But, much worse than that kind of violation, was Masters asking me to take care of Puller. Puller didn't want to go home in the condition he was in. He'd never be a Marine again, much less an officer. His dad was Chesty Puller. And he was missing key body parts.

"With what you've been through you can do this," Masters said. "We can't get up or walk, but you can. Don't let him go back home like this."

Puller was laying on his right side, somehow having been able to move to that position in his grievously wounded condition. He didn't make any sound. I felt he was waiting, but I couldn't know unless I went to his side, which I would not do.

I said nothing in reply to Masters. I realized they hadn't gotten the substance and meaning of my stories at all. I wondered how much combat both officers had really been in before being hit. When I left the I.C.U. room I didn't look back, but I was cut to the quick inside. I wasn't Junior. I was never going to be Junior again, even if it killed me, and I wasn't going to kill anyone again, even if it was to ease someone's pain or poor social or physical circumstance.

"Stop telling your stories," I whispered again to myself before the drug finally worked to drift me away into unconsciousness. "They didn't get it. Nobody's going to get it," I continued, trying to crookedly smile as the words came out.

My attempt to smile came only because I somehow was able to understand Nguyen's last attempt to survive and take care of me.

Then, the very last thought I was capable of struck deep into me. Was I hallucinating the visit to the I.C.U., like I'd hallucinated the unit's entrance, and the people passing by, for all those days and nights? Had Nguyen, improbably and nearly impossibly appearing under the Starlifter, been there at all?

## Chapter X

The flight was nothing more or less than a disjointed series of buzzing noises, vibrations, and brief bouncing bouts where my plastic cocoon swayed out a few inches from the metal bulkhead, and then gently smacked back into it.

I was aware, but unaware, both at the same time. I knew I was on, off, and then above the planet, but not really where I was, or how far or near from anywhere. Morphine-induced thoughts cascaded through my mind the few times I nearly surfaced enough to escape the light swimming current of the drug's seductive power.

The real senses I had seeped slowly on through the clouds I'd been biting since I'd left Japan. I knew the plane had landed and stopped when all was finally still, and mostly silent. There were no shivering vibrations transmitted through the hull of the aircraft. I realized that I was being allowed to surface from the near torpor of the morphine's hold.

My cocoon was removed from the bulkhead by talking humans nearby. I could sense and hear them but not see much of them through the eerie, weird, and misshapen images the plastic allowed for. The material had been almost clear, like milky yellow glass when it was still, but when in motion it didn't allow for either clarity of direct vision or almost anything else.

My body moved. I was shifted onto a soft surface, and then the plastic was cut away from me by two people using big sets of scissors. I watched the process with my head still, observing all I could observe by moving only my eyes, feeling like that if I moved my head the whole scene would dissolve back into the near hibernation state I'd seemed relieved by but trapped in for so long.

Whatever I was on moved and, as was becoming normal for me, I was able only to stare up and watch the 'ceiling' of the inside of the plane's bulkhead pass by. I knew I was moving and not the plane, the thought of which relieved me. I was becoming fully conscious and cogent again. I knew I was being taken somewhere to see my wife, and I wanted to be able to be as clear as possible, as well as minimize the amount of damage visible to her on my body.

It was daytime I realized, as my gurney came down a ramp and out onto the tarmac of the airport. The sun was behind the building I was headed for, but I couldn't make out whether it was going down or just coming up.

Two big doors were open. I saw other gurneys in front of me and knew that a veritable parade of gurneys likely followed me from the plane, as well. I was covered by a blanket, under which I was wearing my hospital pajamas. I lifted my head to see that my feet were bare, which seemed strange. It wasn't too cold out nor was it too warm so being barefooted didn't really bother me. I was in California and back in

the USA, at last. I let my head fall back to the pad of my gurney in relief, as I was wheeled across the threshold of the building's opening and on into a long hall, a hall much larger than the halls I traveled through back at Yokosuka.

I noted the other gurneys being wheeled all around me, some with their pads angled up so the men in them, those capable of it, could look around. I wasn't capable in my drugged state, and, in fact, I could only take in the information that we were all there, being set into places against the walls. I looked to my right where there was an open area forming, running the longitudinal distance of the hall, or so I presumed since I couldn't see that far. The open area began to fill. I realized it was filling with wives and children.

She would be there, I knew. I breathed in and out deeply, wishing the drugs were less pervasive on my consciousness. I wanted to be at my best, my most cogent for her when she arrived.

In only minutes she was there. The same radiant, beautiful, and so very open and friendly woman I'd married earlier in the year. She stopped by the side of my gurney, looked down into my eyes with a fixed smile, and then moved on down the open area of the hall. I watched her short hair bounce as she departed.

I exhaled sharply, wanting to say something to stop her, and bring her back. I watched her retreating figure, however, without saying anything. I was beyond confused, and beginning to wonder if the

drugs hadn't driven me over the deep end of any awareness about what was happening around me.

There was nothing to be done except to wait, hoping that she would return.

In minutes, she was back, accompanied by one of the flight nurses.

"That's him," the nurse said, pointing down at me, "that's your husband, his name is on the chart tucked into the bottom of his gurney."

My wife looked skeptically down at me.

"It's me, really," I got out, only starting to realize that everything about me must have changed.

I weighed a little more than a hundred pounds now, as opposed to the hundred and fifty I'd been when I left her. I was also almost certain my expressions and facial features were probably a bit different, given the stress and agony of my journey since leaving her.

My wife started to cry, the short inches of distance between her and the gurney I was on seemed like the Grand Canyon.

"What have they done to you?" she asked, finally reaching across the distance to put her right hand on my right upper arm.

She finally leaned down and clutched me as close as she could. We hugged there more than we talked. We both knew there was no time. She was living in Daly City, across the bridge from Oakland where the hospital was located. I'd left her only the GTO I'd purchased three days before I'd found out she was pregnant. The car was a four-speed, and my

wife was five feet tall and thin. The clutch alone was a monster to operate on any of San Francisco's hills. Visiting me at the hospital was going to be problematic, I knew, but there was nothing to be said about it until things could be discussed and talked over at a later time.

Only moments passed before the medical people swept through the hall, taking all the wives and children with them. I promised my wife that I would call when I was situated at the hospital across the water.

The loading and trip across the Bay Bridge were uneventful.

My arrival at the facility of Oakland Naval Hospital was not without some drama, however, even though the quick separation of me from my wife in short order, and injecting me with another morphine shot, might have seemed dramatic enough.

The Navy ambulance I'd been loaded into, with five other gurney-bound patients, had been fully enclosed, without windows. When I was finally pulled from the double door opening in the back of the big blue truck, I saw the hospital building and was shocked. It was a huge brand-new modern structure rising up many stories in front of me. It was as different from the dingy strung out low building Yokosuka had been as could possibly be. The place had to be a much more wonderful facility to be secreted away in, and treated, than what I'd so far experienced. The treatment I'd had at the First Medical Facility and then Yokosuka had been



wonderful, but most of that had been because of the personnel. It gave me a relieved sense of well-being to realized that I'd probably have the same class of people caring for me, but with the additional benefit of the latest technical equipment, as well.

I found out very quickly that, once again, I'd be assigned to a room in the 'dirty surgery' portion of the hospital located on the 6th floor. Why any medical operation would use such a negative sounding title for a part of the hospital was beyond me, but at least the drugs were wearing off to the point where I could finally think such thoughts.

Through the opiate haze, I felt myself being wheeled down halls and up a very spacious elevator. In spite of the hospital being brand new, I noted that the ceilings were just like the others in hospitals I'd been in. They were there to protect everyone from what was above and to provide fixtures for light. They weren't there for informing or entertaining patients being wheeled around on their backs who couldn't see anything else.

My room turned out to be a double room with a man half-elevated laying in the bed closest to the outside wall window. My gurney was pushed to the side of the bed nearer the door, but not before I noticed a large sign posted on the wall above the head of the bed. It said; "Junior." My heart thudded and my breathing increased in speed.

Who would have done such a thing, I wondered, until I saw the next bed feature. A baby's mobile was suspended over the bed, swinging slightly down from

two rails that ran farther up from the bed's frame, no doubt their true intent to be available to suspend I.V. bags and other medical equipment. The two attendants who'd accompanied me, part of the plane's medical and transport team, seemed to not take note of any of the odd additions. I was moved gently across the space to lay flat on the bed's surface. I stared up at the mobile, having no doubt about the name taped to the wall but not understanding the mobile at all.

"You're one of those Marines from Vietnam, wounded I would suppose," the patient in the bed across from me said.

"That's right," I replied, trying to ignore the hostility in his voice, as well as, tamp down the anger I felt about having my nickname from Vietnam following me, as well as the potential negative meaning of the baby mobile mounted over the top of my bed.

"It's sir, to you," the man said. "I'm a full Commander, black shoe, and I'll expect the proper use of my title from junior officers like you. I don't know why they let Marines in here with Navy personnel. You people just don't work out well when it comes to accommodating the human condition."

I shrugged to myself. The play on words, his using the junior in junior officers when the word was plastered for him to see above the head of my bed, might have been cause for humor in days past, but not anymore. I was quickly coming to find that the facility I'd been shipped into was world-class in

equipment, as I'd suspected before I entered, but woefully backward when it came to staffing, at nearly all levels. The Commander was like the Navy Lieutenant at Yokosuka, before, of course, I was able to get Barbara to have him transferred to be close to his wife.

"I have stomach cancer, not some easily operable and temporary injury like yourself," the Commander said, the tone of his voice going from testy to acridly acidic. "I didn't get wounded as easy as you. I have to live with the fear of getting it back for the rest of my life."

I began to realize why I'd been given the room I'd been given. The Junior sign was the first warning, the mobile the second, and now the Commander who could not be counseled or given any kind of therapy was the third. Someone at the hospital knew me or about me, and what they knew wasn't good.

"You're a second lieutenant in dirty surgery," the Commander said. "You don't rate a double room, while I rate a private room. I'm having you shipped out of here."

I wanted to say something cutting and hurtful, but I withheld myself. I was in no condition to threaten anyone, least of all someone who outranked by so much. I remained silent, wondering about when I would get another pain injection. There was no clock in the room, and certainly nothing like the giant clocks that had been in every room on every ward back in Yokosuka. Why would a Navy Officer think he was 'wounded' by getting cancer? How did one

‘accommodate the human condition?’ I hadn’t heard such arcane use of language since attending philosophy courses in college.

The Commander picked up his phone and called someone. I didn’t follow what he said, thinking of how to access an outside line so I could call my own wife. But there was no time. Before the Commander was off the phone an attendant appeared to move me.

“Why am I being moved, really? And where to?” I asked of the attendant standing by the side of my bed.

I wasn’t totally opposed to the idea of moving from a room where my roommate was about as agreeable as a poisonous Tarantula spider loaded with speed, but still unsettled by the idea that I had just gotten into the room when another change was being foisted upon me. I wasn’t certain, but it seemed unlikely that the Commander could summon up the powers that be to get another badly wounded critical patient dumped from his room merely so he could have a measure of privacy.

There was no answer to my questions. At Oak Knoll, the nickname for the hospital, I was astounded to find that there were no corpsmen, either assigned or working the halls, rooms, or anywhere else. The attendants were private contracted medical personnel of unknown backgrounds and credentials. Without the corpsmen, the personal part of the care they’d so wonderfully provided was completely gone. The attendant merely called out the open door for a cohort who hauled in a gurney.

The commander, the Naval Officer, of seeming worst repute and with cancer, in the next bed, simply stared at me as I was wheeled out.

I wondered as we moved down the hall toward the southern end of the building wing, whether the Junior sign and child's mobile would follow me to my new room.

The end of the hall came abruptly. The attendants pushed my gurney to one side, while the female attendant pulled out a ring of keys and promptly went to work on a large deadbolt lock securing the door just under its entrance and exit lever.

I stared, my eyes going larger in wonder. Why was the room I was being moved to locked? What did they keep in there that had to be secured?

The double doors swung open, and my gurney was retrieved and quickly pushed into the opening. I realized immediately that it wasn't a room at all, but a ward. I was being moved into a six-bed ward, of which five of the beds were occupied. The men in the beds were all conscious and all staring at me.

There was no 'Junior' on the wall above the front of the bed I was quickly carried across to, nor a mobile mounted above it. The expressions on the face of the attendants were grim as if I had done something to deserve their ire or bad feelings. I didn't know what to ask or say, so I remained silent.

The attendants swept the curtain around the bed closed, but not before a young man with a

stethoscope around his neck slipped through and in close to the left side.

“You’ll have the head surgeon assigned to your case, for your next surgery,” the young man said. “I’m doctor Kent, your doctor for everything not surgically related.”

“Oh, thanks for coming,” I replied, trying to sound sincere, but in reality, completely lost in this new system of medical care so entirely different from anything else I’d experienced. “I don’t have a clock or watch, when is my next pain shot scheduled for?” I asked.

“You aren’t getting pain shots anymore,” Dr. Kent replied, looking down at the chart in his hands, or making believing he was doing so.

“No pain shots?” I asked, shock and instant deep worry coming into my voice. “What about the pain?”

“You’re an addict,” Dr. Kent said, checking off something on the chart, still not looking at me. “You’ve been on morphine every three or four hours for months. You’re done with that. That’s why you’re in here, to detox. You can have visitors once you get through.”

“What about the pain?” I said, my voice becoming anguished, as I knew another wave of pain was growing deep down inside me.

“You’re a Marine, you can hack it,” he replied, not looking at me directly, “You get some more medication after your next surgery, but nothing before.”

With that he reached back, whipped away the

hanging curtain, and disappeared through the opening.

I couldn't think of anything to say in time to stop him, my mind was in too much shock. My wife wouldn't be visiting. I'd seen her for a few brief moments at Travis and that had been it. My daughter's existence was still physically unknown to me.

I heard the key operate in the lock, and laid still for a few moments. I had a call button but no control of a television, but then there was no television visible to control, either.

I leaned as far out as my body would allow, grabbed the curtain, and began working it back around my bed. After five full minutes, much of it in pain, I had it pulled far enough back so I could see the other men in the room.

"Where am I?" I whispered out. "Are you all detoxing?"

All five men laughed at once.

"No," the man right next to me replied. "We're all patients from the brig. We're not surgical patients, but this ward is the only one they have that locks, so they can keep us in."

I realized I was locked up for the first time in my life.

"What you detoxing from?" the man asked, after introducing himself as Walter Peterman.

"I've been on morphine for a long time," I said. "I was shot in Vietnam, back on the 1st of October, and have had to have it all the time since."

"You better call for some ice, towels, and water," Peterman advised. "Looks like you're going to have a pretty rough trip."

I pushed my call button.

The lock on the door operated a few minutes later, the door opened, and then an attendant came in accompanied by a Marine Corps Second Lieutenant in Dress A Greens, with a full blouse, tie and piss cutter cover folded over the left portion of his belt.

The attendant came up to the bed, with the Marine following right behind her.

"This is your Marine Liaison Officer," she stated. "What is it you want," she went on when I didn't respond.

"These guys in here say I'm going to need water, ice, and towels to detox, is that true?" I asked.

"You'll need some pans too," she replied, "for the vomiting, and maybe some extra covers for later on when it's mostly run its course."

I couldn't get over the fact that my coming time of total misery was talked about like it was no big deal, which to them apparently was no big deal.

"What's wrong with that doctor?" I asked, unable to stop myself. "He doesn't seem old enough to have proper credentials and he seems like he's mean-spirited down to his core." I turned to look at the Marine Officer, his name tag on his right breast reading Johannson. "Can you get me another doctor?" I asked him, directly.

"Fraid not," Johannson replied, a big smile on his face. I noted from his single National Defense ribbon



that he'd not been to Vietnam. "I'm here for sundries and outside contacts. I can call your wife for you since you have to stay in this ward, and there's no phone.

I looked around the room once again. No phone. I hadn't noticed that and it was a big deal. I was about to be in a lot of trouble and I was going to be in trouble all alone.

I gave Johansson my wife's phone number and told him to call and tell her that I was in for an initial evaluation and she wouldn't be allowed to visit for three more days. I knew there was no point in complaining about anything or appealing. I was stuck inside a process driven by forces I couldn't understand. I didn't know who knew about me as Junior from Vietnam but I'd seen enough, from the sign, the mobile and now my lock up with prisoners, having to detox all on my own. I knew some force was at work. I would first have to survive the 'pretty rough trip' in this room and I also knew it was going to a rough trip, indeed.

I resented being locked up with prisoners from the brig, but my resentment didn't last long. Only Peterman had spoken to me until a guy from over near one of the windows on the far side of the room approached my bed.

"You're going to need these to get to the other side," he said, opening the single metal drawer in the little bureau next to my bed on the right side.

"Can you reach down that far?" he asked.

I reached down to make sure I could.

The man dumped a supply of pills from a bottle, then sealed it back up. He turned to go but stopped briefly.

“Codeine #3,” he whispered. “Much weaker than morphine or Demerol but it’ll get you through the tough spots of pain, and also push back the hallucinations and nightmares from the detox. Got more if you need them, but take them sparingly. If I get caught stealing them then I’ll have to tell them where the pills went. Take no more than three at a time and space them out as much as you can.”

I thanked the man, as he walked away. He didn’t respond further, merely returning to his own bed.

“It’s bad enough being in here, but it’s worse being in here with someone crying, sweating, and puking all night long,” Peterman whispered over to me.

I got what he was saying. The man wasn’t being kind to me. He was being kind to himself, and his friends in the other beds. There had been some immediate wonder in my mind about why he hadn’t asked for compensation of any kind until I understood the rest of the story.

“What are you in the brig for?” I asked Peterman.

“Oh, I had a disagreement with a senior NCO and we fought it out,” Peterman replied, with a big smile on his face.

“What happened to the NCO?” I asked.

“He died,” Peterman said, no emotion in his voice at all.

“So, they hit you with a charge of murder?” I inquired, surprise pushing back the pain that was rising up from the center of my torso.

“Yeah,” he replied, and then asked, after a few seconds: “What are you in for?”

I looked all around about me, thinking about the Junior sign that had been prepared for me, before replying.

“Same thing,” I said.

## Chapter XI

There was no delay, no time given, no quarter extended by my body, nor begged for by my mind. I'd never detoxed before, although the pain had become an old bad friend. The codeine tablets in my nearby metal drawer, twenty-three of them, got me through the night and on into the next day but the awful nature of combining the pain with the horrid terrible shakes, hallucinations, sweating, and fear was horrific. I believed that I would have died if I had not had the prisoner-supplied supplement. Not only that, but the prisoners were there when the supply ran out to add more codeine. I wondered if I would have to detox from that at some future time, but future time meant nothing to me. There wasn't even a clock to count the minutes of misery, the seconds of bitter terror, and the actual agonizing physical nature of all of it.

I did not sleep, I lay in moving, moaning misery, waiting for a sun to rise and fall behind the never to be opened blinds on the windows. I waited for more water, ice, and bed changes. Our ward had a bathroom and I spent hours inside it through the nights, using the toilet instead of the pans for the heaving vomit, that most often produced nothing except almost complete exhaustion. Hot showers were a very small relief, but the shower made noise and the other prisoners didn't like noises in the night. None of them had been to Vietnam so none of them were creatures of the night.

The prisoners weren't bad men, not in my view anyway. They seemed to care a whole lot more than the rest of the Oak Knoll staff thrown in together. Peterman had killed no one, which is what I expected. I was the only killer in the ward but wasn't in the ward because of it. I also didn't think the 'killer' had much chance of making it through the detox and lack of real pain drugs alive.

My wife came to visit in the afternoon of the second day. I knew when they came to tell me she was outside at the nurse's station that she'd not taken long to penetrate the fiction I'd had the Marine Liaison Officer perpetrate on my behalf.

My wife was smart as a whip and nobody's fool when it came to those things she was deeply concerned about.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, as the attendant pulled the curtains back on the wall side. I didn't miss the fact that the words 'hello' and 'I love you' were nowhere to be found in that sentence.

I wondered what I'd failed to tell her, since the question was uncommon, with respect to either my condition or the 'treatment' I was undergoing.

"You look terrible," she concluded, after eyeing the mess of my body, bed, pajamas, and the debris laying around the bed.

"You're losing weight, they say almost a pound a day," she said.

I almost shook my head in wonder. I'd expected to hear about my drug addiction, my quartering with criminals, or something else entirely.

“You’re coming surgery isn’t on the schedule until March,” she said. “That simpleton Marine, Johansson, is working with the chief of surgery to get you a medical pass for three weeks because if you don’t gain weight then there’s not going to any reason to even do the surgery. Later today they’re giving you some solid food for the first time. If you keep that down then you can come home.”

I looked at her and had to smile through the pain and detox misery. She had no idea what I was going through and I wanted to keep it that way. Solid food wasn’t going to be a problem when they brought it. The toilet would eat that. I was in no condition to keep anything down, even water.

“They’re taking you out of this locked prison too, later today,” she went on, pacing next to my bed. “I told them I was calling the Commandant of the Marine Corps if they didn’t. What is wrong with these people?”

The only inmate who’d never said a word to me got out of his bed and walked to stand on the other side of the bed from where my wife stood.

“Hey, baby, you look hot and ready in that mini-skirt, and the loser you’re married to is good for about nothing, as you can see,” he said, his voice quiet but menacing.

My wife just looked back at him without changing her expression.

“You got something to say, hot stuff?” he went on, but again my wife didn’t respond, instead leaning

down, picking up the call control, and pushing the button.

An attendant, or nurse, as all the staff I had met so far, except for the doctors, wore similar outfits, was there, outside the door and operating its locking mechanism. It was as if the staff knew they must be standing by as long as my wife was in the room with me.

The door opened. My wife turned, walked to it, pulled it fully open, and then walked out, her pump heels clicking out the only sound there was following the inmate's comments. She didn't look back at me or the inmate.

Once she was out of the room, the attendant slipped inside and approached my bed.

"They'll be coming to disconnect you from the I.V. and the catheter soon," she said, her voice almost a whisper, not looking across the bed where the inmate who's spoken to my wife still stood, as if waiting for some answer to his nasty comment and question.

"They'll bring you a regular light meal after that," she continued, and if you keep that down for a few hours you'll be on your way.

I was sick as hell, the room not exactly remaining still, the nausea I felt barely containable, and the pain from my abdominal and hip wounds hurting badly. I'd popped a couple of codeine pills an hour earlier, however, and they were allowing me to present some semblance of normality as I smiled and encouraged her to stay when all I wanted her to do was get the

hell out of the room. Unfinished business stood next to my bed on the other side. Business that I was well accustomed to and very prepared to deal with.

"I don't agree with the rest of them," the attendant whispered.

"Agree with whom about what?" I asked, unable to keep the worry out of my voice. I needed the staff to want to get rid of me, not keep me for even another day.

"They protest the war all the time," she replied, surprising me. "That's why they don't like you. There was another patient who came through here a couple of days before you. He talked about you. That's how they knew you were Junior in Vietnam and how much you don't like the name.

"Who was it?" I asked, but she only shook her head, either not knowing or unwilling to tell me.

"What's your name?" I finally asked.

"Edith," she replied. "I'm an R.N."

"Thank you, Edith the R.N." I replied, with a relieved smile. The mystery of why I'd been treated so badly was being revealed, and it was not likely to keep me from going home, at least for a while. It was also good to finally find out someone's name. In Yokosuka all the personnel at the hospital I'd had any contact with wore nametags, but not at Oak Knoll.

Edith looked across the bed at the inmate, but she said nothing before turning and retreating toward the door. "I'll be back when they come to help you," she said, over her shoulder and going through the cracked open door.



The lock was then turned from the outside, and silence fell over the room. I looked up at the inmate standing nearby, wondering why he was still there. Peterman was in his bed. The inmate stood between where he was and my own bed.

"Your one of those hero veterans returned from the war, I'm guessing," the inmate said, making sure his voice carried to everyone in the room. "You come out of some phony jungle war and think you're tough, but I've got some news for you. I've been in and out of jails all my life. It's why the Navy wanted me. They need tough men, not banged up pieces of shit who look like kewpie dolls."

I looked at him, my face expressionless, but said nothing.

"That's it, that's all you got?" he asked, laughing out loud. I make a play for your wife right in front of you and you've got nothing to say?

He looked around the room at the other men, his laugh reduced to a huge grin. "That's what I thought," he went on. "I'll be making a visit to your home address just as soon as I get out of here. Your wife's quite the sex package."

"I'm glad you have the same good taste in women, as I do," I replied, quietly.

"What a chicken shit thing to say," the inmate concluded, turning while he said the words and then slowly walking back to his bunk, his body moving like John Wayne walking his special walk.

A few moments went by, as I waited patiently for the medical team to return. I wondered when I should

take the black beauty, but I felt it was too soon. The team would not release me. That would have to take the applied judgment of the young doctor who'd put me on the ward, I knew. I had to wait, getting by on the codeine tablets.

Peterman got out of his bunk. I presumed he was going to use the bathroom, located on the other side of my bunk, but he walked the few steps to the right side of my bed instead. He leaned down.

"Don't do it," he breathed out.

"Don't do what? I replied, wondering what he was getting at.

"I know your background," he went on. "I hear things in this place, even though it doesn't seem that way. I heard about you. You're this really nice, innocent, easy-going young guy who really does look like a kewpie doll."

I stared up into Peterman's eyes, still not sure of what he was getting at.

"He has no idea," he said. "It's all an act. You're very intelligent and you've been to hell and back. He doesn't have a clue that he might not live through this day, much less the night if you're still here...or maybe sometime in the future when you choose to hunt him down."

I was shocked at what he said. It was like Peterman was accessing parts of my mind and soul I was totally unaware were reachable by anyone, excepting myself.

"Don't do it," Peterman repeated. "He's right about your wife. She's not only a knockout but she's

smart and totally in your camp. You'll lose her and your daughter if you go to prison like us, so it's not worth the risk."

I knew Peterman was right. I wasn't going to be able to do anything about the other inmate's behavior or what he'd said. All I must think about was the mission; somehow getting to the small apartment my wife and daughter shared with another Vietnam Veteran's wife. He hadn't come home early, more than likely because he was an attorney and would never see the bottom of the A Shau Valley or any other combat zone. My first objective to accomplish the mission was to get medically approved for disconnection. The second was getting disconnected. The third was being approved for solid food, no matter how limited the diet might be. Finally, actually getting physically transported would take the remainder of whatever extra energy I could generate. There was no place in any of my plan to destroy, maim or kill some lowlife career criminal.

"Your wife is one piece of work, no question about that," Peterman said, and the other men laughed.

"Yes, she's something else again," I whispered, more to myself than to the men.

I was no longer in it alone, and that feeling warmed my heart, and put fight right back inside me. I went to work cleaning up the bed, the area around it, and making everything look almost as if there was a normal patient staying in it instead of the mess that was me.

“You’re going to need these,” Peterman said, walking over to where I was working, gagging, trying to breathe, and still get something accomplished in cleaning my area up. He handed me the pill bottle containing the remainder of the codeine pills.

“You’re also a long way from being through, and I don’t even know about the pain,” Peterman said. “They can’t release you with the catheter or the I.V. so you have to sell them on letting you go without you needing them anymore if you can do it. The black pill, the only one that’s not codeine, is called a Black Beauty, and it’ll raise you up from the dead long enough to allow you pass as a regular human being, for about two hours, and then you’re going down for quite a long sleep.”

I was surprised, as I tried to rest when they finally came just after noon. The single Salisbury steak lunch came right along with them. The doctor made no appearance, so my preparations to attempt to treat him with respect and care I felt nothing of was to no avail. They took the catheter out, with some difficulty, as it had been in place for some time. The I.V. was pulled with ease, however. I was quickly shown how to change the colostomy bag, which hadn’t been needed since my diet had been all liquid. The four-person crew departed, with only Edith remaining, my covered lunch plate on a swing-out arm table she held onto.

I let her start to slip the table across the bed, in order to get the plate before me, but I stopped her. I’d already slipped the pill bottle into the single pocket in

the bottom of my flimsy hospital pajamas. I indicated that I had to use the bathroom, which was the truth since I could not take the Black Beauty in front of her. I knew I needed the drug, if it would work, to cover just how bad my withdrawals were proceeding. The hallucinations were the worst. I kept seeing my Marines standing around. In a corner here or at the distant window. When I'd look away, blink my eyes, and look back they'd be gone. I tried not to look at all but, in the daytime, I had to look somewhere. I couldn't take enough codeine to be unconscious and I couldn't afford to be that way in order to get free of the hospital anyway.

I took the Black Beauty, washing it down with handfuls of water from the tap inside the beautiful new and spacious bathroom. I wanted a shower before I left for home but didn't want to put anything in the way of my leaving. I relieved myself for the first time since being in the field in Vietnam. It hurt badly to do so, but the relief was so overwhelming, that it all still worked, that I let out a sigh and said 'thank the living Christ' out loud, as I finished. I prepared myself to get back to my bed, in order to attempt to figure out how I was going to eat a whole meal when there was no hope I could possibly consume one bite without it coming right back up.

Edith was gone when I opened the bathroom door. I walked to the bed, once again feeling a near euphoria from not having to drag bottles and bags around with me whenever and wherever I moved. Edith was gone. That fact struck me like a

flash of lightning. I grabbed the plate, walked quickly to the bathroom, and flushed the meat into the toilet, saving only a chunk of bread and some beans so it wouldn't appear obvious what I'd done.

I had energy, I realized, as I got back into bed and repositioned the levered arm table, atop of which sat the empty plate, a filled water glass, and cheap silverware. I scrunched up the napkin after rubbing it slightly on the used plate surface. I was ready and all of a sudden feeling almost normal for the first time since the detox had kicked in two days before. I wanted to walk, even run. I controlled my breathing at that point. I realized the Black Beauty was kicking in and my state could not be observed to be too great or someone as experienced as Edith, or even as smart as the doctor, might figure it out.

I looked over at Peterman, who'd observed everything I'd done.

I'd closed the curtain around my bed, excepting the part between Peterman and me. The bad inmate was still to be feared, not for his physical intimidating presentation or possible action, but because he could observe and then talk.

Peterman got out of his bed quickly, cross the short space between us, and held out his hand.

"The pill bottle," he whispered. "They're going to change you out for travel and you can't have them finding it. I'll give it back when you're ready to be transported."

I thanked God for Peterman, wondered about whether the Black Beauty, making me feel human

again, wasn't also drawing down what intellect I might still have. I handed over the bottle. Peterman pushed me gently from a sitting position into the upward leaning mattress at the head of my bed. He pulled back just as the curtain was swept back and the doctor appeared, to stand with my chart in his hand at the foot of the bed.

"Looks like you can eat and hold it down," he observed, marking something on his chart. "Take his blood pressure and vitals," he instructed Edith, who appeared on his right.

I realized I had not heard the operation of the door lock. The Black Beauty was having effects on me that were beginning to scare me.

The apartment, located on a seemingly anonymous back street in Daly City, was small. The upper floor and lower all looked exactly alike up and down the street. When I'd dropped my wife to stay and wait for me to one day come home from Vietnam I'd sat looking up and down the street one day. I realized then that, if someone had too much to drink, then that someone might never find his or her actual apartment in the clone-like mass of hundreds of identical structures lining the narrow streets without going door to door and begging for help.

My wife had no trouble finding our place, however. I knew that, even with the street name and number memorized, in my current condition, I would have had a much tougher time finding the place without her.

The car quit running in the short driveway without my wife turning the ignition off.

I got out with a little difficulty and went straight through the lower doorway leading to the staircase that led to the upstairs apartment. My wife had been allowed to transport me in what turned out to be the battered and nearly not running GTO I'd purchased two days before she'd called while I was in the Basic School to announce the pregnancy. The car was going to be a problem but I wanted to see my daughter first and my .45 second. I'd won the .45 Colt for being the top candidate in the school in the Military Skills area (the jock area). I'd been without a .45 since the medevac to First Med from the Valley. I needed my daughter, my wife, and the .45. Everything would be okay if I just had those three things.

Pat, my wife's roommate, waited at the top of the stairs with the door open, a great smile playing across her face. A song I recognized played from behind her, sounding just as tinny as the small speaker Fusner's radio had produced on a daily basis. The song playing was "***You'll Never Walk Alone***". I stopped once I was inside the door. I was taken back, not visually not in a hallucination but just stopped dead in my tracks by memory. The words mid-song played into my ears but reached deep into my very soul: "*Walk on through the wind, Walk on through the rain, though your dreams be tossed and blown. Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart and you'll never walk alone...you'll never walk...you'll*



*never walk...you'll never walk alone.*" Roy Orbison sang on, but the paralysis that stopped me didn't reach into my wife's roommate, now my roommate too.

"What is it?" Pat asked. I heard my wife's footsteps coming up the stairs. She'd told me in a letter how a Marine Officer and a Staff Sergeant had come up those stairs' months back, to inquire about whether a Marine Officer's wife resided in the apartment. My wife and I had always thought that the Corps only sent personnel on such calls if the Marine was dead. All she could ask the Marines was "which one?" They'd had to take some time to talk and figure out that my wife didn't know if it was her roommate's husband or me who was dead.

"Nothing," I said. The last time I'd heard that song had been while listening to the Jerry and the Pacemakers version sitting by a composition B fire while heating water for coffee with Zippo, Stevens, Fusner, and Nguyen. I forced myself to move. The .45 would have to wait. I wasn't about to ask the two women where the gun was. I would have to wait. If the lowlife scum of an inmate came to visit then I would introduce him to the firearm.

I breathed in and out deeply. The Black Beauty was still affecting me deeply. I thought about Peterman. He'd taken my name and address in case he got out and might be able to find me in life, or he'd used that excuse in the hospital hall so he could get the pill bottle back to me. I owed him. I hoped I would see him again one day. I thought about what he'd

said about not doing what I had been thinking of doing to the inmate. I had to keep that in front of my mind and not the .45. I also knew the drug was wearing off because tendrils of pain were beginning to surface and nausea was laying deep down inside me, getting ready to make itself evident again.

I was home. I'd made it. Even if I was never to take another step, I'd made it back, somehow.

Pat looked closely at me, as I went silent, waiting for my wife to join us.

"What happened to you?" she asked, leaning in close to examine my face. "No, I mean what the hell happened to you? It is you, isn't it?"

My wife stepped through the door, no doubt overhearing the surprising shock in her roommate's voice.

"She's in the bedroom in her crib waiting," My wife interrupted, changing the subject. "She's always waiting, and she's never even met you."

I knew I didn't have long. I had to get down, get fluids into me, get a pan or garbage can, and then go back into the detox that'd been put off for a bit but not finished. The car needed me, my wife needed me, although I also knew I needed her more than she needed me, and her short performance at the hospital had burned that in. I hoped my daughter needed me too. I followed my wife down the hall leading off from the living room. Christmas was days away, my mind fixated momentarily, as we walked, on an open corner of the room that the tree would fit into perfectly. I heard small gurgling sounds coming out through the

bedroom door we were approaching. I smiled, for the first time since being in the hospital. I hoped my daughter was as ready to meet me as I was to meet her.

I walked through the door.

## Chapter XII

My daughter was a very definitive curly blond thing that was simply delightful at every point of her five-month existence, and for some unknown reason, in spite of my shattered condition, colostomy bag, and scant physical presence, she found me to be the apple of her eye. Where I went, at dead ahead slow speed, through the apartment, she followed or preceded along like she'd been waiting all five months of her life for my kind of direction. She crawled, but, for the most part, so did I.

I couldn't fix the GTO. The engine was shot. It only ran at all because it had eight huge cylinders, three large carburetors, and a four-speed transmission that was all but indestructible. It limped along when it ran at all. Pat's car was needed by her for her job, which was all that was keeping us in the apartment because my pay records from Vietnam had not caught up with me.

Going through the yellow pages I found a garage, attached to a Sears and Roebuck store not too far from us. The shop promised to rebuild an entire engine, no matter what the car, for six hundred dollars. We didn't have six hundred dollars but I called them anyway. There was no hope and the person I talked to basically said just that.

How would we get the car there anyway, as it didn't seem to have even one more mile in its living inventory? How would we get back? We could

depend upon Pat when she was done with work, but it would be better not to. My wife could drive the GTO, but her driving, what with the thirty-pound clutch and the jerking, balking, and stalling 389 cubic inch engine, was a bit of a hesitantly rolling nightmare. I was certain I could drive but neither my wife nor anybody else around in their right mind was going to let me try. But the real problem was the money. We didn't have six hundred dollars. We didn't have twenty dollars. We barely had any change.

I started going for a walk every day, although I couldn't walk far because I was still unable to eat truly solid food and couldn't seem to build up enough energy from liquids and semi-liquids, like Jell-O, to a sufficient level for real exercise. When going out I always carried a folded-up pack of 4X4 bandages, as my center incision bled slowly at all times. The M&M gas station and garage were only two blocks from our apartment. After a lot of arguments with my wife, I was given permission to walk there and back, since they had a bathroom where I could change out my bandages.

The walk was fatiguing, but more because of the pain in my hip than the fact that I wasn't packing enough energy. My codeine pills, given to me by the convicts at Oak Knoll, had run out, so I was on my own. Pat had been shocked that the hospital would release me with only a couple of boxes of bandages, some of the new paper adhesive tape that didn't stick so badly it hurt to take it off, and a few colostomy bags. No pain pills or antibacterial drugs, or any of

that. I had one bottle of Betadine, the orange-colored disinfectant I applied all around my wounds before rebandaging, but only when I was at home. I didn't like to use it because it stained every bit of skin it touched, and I wasn't into carrying either the big brown bottle or rubber gloves everywhere I might be able to go.

M&M was a dirty mess of a gas station, but with one saving feature. A great red horse with huge wings flew in permanent stasis over the top of it. The place had a small office, a double bay garage, and four gas pumps outside. Nobody was ever at the pumps but the work bays were always full. The mechanics had to pump the gas and made no secret about not wanting to stop work in any of the bays to do such a mundane low-class chore as pumping gas entailed.

There was nobody in the office when I made it to the station, so I merely walked through it and went into the bathroom, which was startling in that it was immaculately clean. I closed the door and went about changing my four-by-four bandages running up and down my torso. I saw myself in the big mirror that hung just above the low-slung sink. I noted the forward bend of my upper body. I could not stand up straight, as I'd done for my whole life. How could I be a Marine again if I couldn't stand straight? I tried to throw my shoulders back but it was no use. My stomach told me that it wasn't going for that at all. I flushed the bloody rags down the toilet, pulled the roll of special painless tape from my pocket, and then deftly placed and taped the new pads to the still open

wound. I wondered if the long vertical incision would heal up before they cut it open again in the coming surgery, but then set such thinking aside, as best I could.

I was ready. I looked in the mirror and smiled at myself. I was alive and back in the world of the round eyes. Nothing was going to stop me from fitting back in and having a real life once again. I stared deeply into my own eyes, which I seldom ever did. I didn't like the look that stared back at me. There was something wrong. I turned my head to look behind me, but there was only a wall with a continuous cloth dispenser mounted on its surface. When I turned back, my eyes were staring straight through me. I looked back into my own eyes and tried to make them smile like my mouth was doing, but they'd have nothing to do with that. I realized that maybe I could just look at other people's facial features and not directly into their eyes. They might not guess that something was wrong with me, that I didn't fit, that I wasn't quite right.

The garage bay wasn't connected to the office by a door so I went outside and entered the bay nearest the street through the big open garage door. A mechanic was working under a Mustang on one of those little angle-wheeled sliding-around things. Only his legs protruded out from under the driver's side.

"Hi," was all I could think to say to get his attention.

"Whattaya want?" a deep male voice asked, the sound coming out from under the side of the car.

I didn't get a chance to answer because a bell rang and the mechanic said "shit," very loudly. "

"Not now," he said a little later, but not as loudly.

"Can I help?" I asked, not being able to quite figure out what the problem might be.

"Know how to pump gas?" the voice said.

"Yes," I replied, finally putting it together that the man didn't want to come out from under the car, and that the bell had been for a customer driving up to one of the pumps out front.

The man didn't say anything else, so I walked out the garage door and over to the Pontiac station wagon sitting at one of the outer pumps.

A woman was behind the wheel, with her window down.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" I asked.

"My tire's going flat," she said pointing to the right front of the car, "can you fill it with air again?"

I walked around the front of the car, slowly eased down to examine the tire. I didn't have to examine much. The tire was nearly bald and a rubber knot the size of a golf ball was sticking out of the sidewall. I looked at the rear tire. Even from a distance, I could tell that the rear one was shot, as well.

I went back to her window.

"You need a new set of tires," I informed her. "I'll put air in the nearly flat one, but you're not going to get far."

"When can I get new tires, then?" the woman asked.



"I'll check," I answered, moving first to pull up the air hose sunk into a concrete hole next to the pump.

There was a switch near the hole so I hit the rocker. I heard the compressor go on inside the garage. After putting some unknown number of pounds into the tire, as I had no gauge, I put the hose back, turned the switch off, and went through the open garage door once more.

"She didn't want gas," I said to the man under the car. "She wanted some air in her front tire."

"Not even a sale, just my luck on this day," the man replied, more to himself than to me.

"I filled the tire, but didn't have a gauge, so I guessed," I said. "I told her she needed new tires because her Catalina's tires are all shot. She wants to know when she can get new tires put on."

The man wheeled his little lay-down board-with-wheels out from under the car, quicker than I would have believed possible.

"You sold a whole set of tires, just like that?" he asked, amazement in his tone.

"I guess so," I replied, not bothering to tell the man that the woman really sold herself. All I'd done was point out the fact that her tires were not going to last very far.

"When can we get tires for a 66 Catalina wagon?"

"Hell, I've got a set here or at least a set that'll work," he replied, getting up and beginning to walk around the garage checking out tires that were set in

long successive rows up on wall shelves that lined the entire place.

I wondered what a 'set that would work,' might look like, or drive like, but it was none of my business.

"Where's she live?" the man asked.

"Hell, I don't know," I answered, surprised. "Why does it matter?"

"We'll give her a ride home and then deliver the car when it's done later today if we can, that's why," the man answered.

I walked out of the shop again and approached the Catalina on the driver's side. I told the woman the situation, and it turned out she lived only a few miles away.

By the time I got back to where the man was working, he was up on a tall ladder pulling down some tires and tossing them to the floor. Each tire made a loud smack as it hit the concrete.

"Get those out of the way," he yelled down. "The keys to the Olds are on a hook by the cash register. You can drive stick?"

I was stunned. I'd seen the convertible Oldsmobile 442 parked next to the sidewalk outside the office. Nobody let someone they didn't know drive such an expensive and fast car. Nobody.

"Got it," was all I could think to say.

I was going to get to drive. I wasn't even certain I could drive, but the excitement and the normality of it nearly overcame me. Emotion rushed through my mind and body. I felt like I'd felt after taking the Black Beauty, but I'd taken nothing. I moved the tires but it

was hard for me, as my full strength had not yet come back.

"It's two hundred for the tires, see if you can get a check," the man said, rolling the tires to the front of the Mustang to get ready to install them.

"She's getting racing tires, which means she'll be back in less than a year. Great traction but they don't wear worth a damn."

I went back out to where the woman still sat in her station wagon, her keys out of the ignition and in her hand.

"I'll drive you home, and pick you up later today when the new tires are on," I informed her.

The woman nodded and got out of the Catalina. I could almost feel the man inside the garage licking his lips, waiting like a striking snake to mount the new tires on the car, deliver it back to the woman's home, and get the check.

I drove the woman home. The 442 was everything my GTO wasn't. It was smooth, powerful, and unhesitating in responding to every command or movement. I asked the woman for a two hundred dollar check when I dropped her off. She said she'd pay when I delivered her car. There was nothing further I could do.

When I was back at the shop, the man had already removed the Mustang from the garage and replaced it with the Catalina, which was jacked up on all four corners.

"Why am I doing this, me Mickey Thompson, you might wonder?" the man asked.

I was stunned. Who had not heard of Mickey Thompson? The great racer, the builder of a land speed record vehicle.

“What are you doing in San Francisco?” I asked, my voice giving way to the amazement I felt. Thompson was known for having a huge speed shop all of his own down in the L.A. area.

“The first M in M&M is mine, for Mickey,” he responded, pulling off a wheel and getting it ready to be broken down on his tire changing machine. “The second M is for Mike, my former partner. We were going to open a whole chain of these stations and speed garages but he screwed me and then ran off and opened his own station five miles from here. I gotta get this place ready to sell. I just don’t have the time.”

“Thanks for the help, might be in order,” I said, “and I guess I’m not done yet. She’s writing a check on delivery.”

“Not exactly a trusting woman, eh?” he replied.

“So, what did you want when you walked in here?” Mickey asked.

“I’ve a 66 GTO on its last legs and I need it so it can run. I’m just back from Vietnam, where I got shot all to hell. I have to go back in for surgery and I need the car so my wife can visit me when I’m in there.”

“And,” Mickey said, after almost a full minute.

“I don’t have any money,” I replied, hating to say the words.

“66 GTO,” Mickey said to himself. “Fastback or convertible?” he asked.

“Hardtop,” I replied.

“Mike has a 66 GTO hardtop too,” Mickey said. “He’s got it entered in at Half Moon Bay Dragway in the E Stock category.”

“Can you get your GTO in here?” he asked, changing another tire.

“I think so,” I replied, more hope than a reality in my voice.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mickey said. “I want to beat that son-of-a-bitch, and this might be just the way to do it. “Bring it tomorrow. I’ll be done with this job in an hour, or so. You can take the Catalina back to her then. I’ll follow you in my pick-up. Wait in the office and take care of any other customers that come along. Your take on the tires is twenty bucks.”

“Why isn’t there anybody else working here?” I asked, getting ready to follow his instructions and wait in the office, ignoring his offer of the twenty bucks, so it wouldn’t seem that such a seemingly small amount meant so much to me.

“I won’t pay anybody much, and anybody I hire seems to not want to work for me after a while.”

I went to the office to wait. There was no way I could go home and tell my wife anything, and she’d be beginning to worry. If I walked home she wouldn’t let me come back, that much I knew. If she found out I was driving then there would much more hell to pay than that. All I could do was hope she didn’t take it upon herself to pile our daughter into the stroller and

come to find me. The twenty bucks meant a lot but the prospect of having the GTO repaired at no or little cost was huge. I had to wait.

I had to deliver the Catalina, and I had plenty of time to come up with a reasonable lie.

I drove the Catalina to the woman's address. I couldn't believe the capability of the big station wagon. It seemed just as nimble and quick as Mickey's 442. The emblems on the front fenders said 421, which I believed to be the size of the engine. Whatever the engine was, it was massively powerful for such a family looking vehicle.

My ride back with Mickey was a good one. He was happy to have the check the woman handed over without comment. I was equally as happy to get a twenty-dollar bill for my time and services.

"Be there at six," Mickey said. "I get up early. I'll look at it. No promises. You really got shot in Vietnam as a Marine?"

I was surprised by the staccato-delivered comments followed by a question on a completely different subject.

"Yes, I was a company commander over there, and I barely made it home," I replied, not knowing where he was going with the information.

"I wanted to be a Marine, but they said I was too old to enlist and had no education to be an officer."

I got out of the pick-up without saying anything further. I didn't know whether his Marine experience was a good or bad thing for me. I knew though, as I watched him drive away, that he was the only hope I

had of having the kind of transportation my wife, daughter, and I would need in the coming weeks and months.

My wife was waiting at the top of the steps, the door hanging open.

"Nice of you to show up," she began, but I cut her off.

"Tomorrow morning, this guy named Mickey Thompson, who owns the gas station on the corner might help. He's going to look at the car to see if he'll do the work for no charge." I got it out, as rapidly as I could, so as not to have to tell her any more than necessary.

My wife was truly gifted at being a detective, in getting everything out of me that was in me, on most occasions.

"Why?" she asked, as I entered the apartment, where my daughter stood in her playpen of a prison. She held the side of the pen with both scrunched-up hands, staring out, waiting.

"He's got some kind of grudge match at the drag raceway in Half Moon Bay with his old partner, and the guy's running a 66 GTO just like ours in the E Stock category," I said, approaching the playpen and going to my knees to greet my daughter. "I think Mickey wants to fix our car to run against that guy's car and then we get it all repaired after the race."

"Oh, I see, the thing wasn't fast enough, and now it's going to be faster?" my wife asked, even if she really was more making a statement than asking a question.

I went down to the floor and laid on my side for a bit, realizing that I'd totally exhausted myself. If Mickey hadn't driven me home I don't think I would have made it.

"Pat," I heard my wife yell, like a voice in a cave or tunnel. I felt lifted partially, to a sitting position. "Let's get him onto the couch. I don't want to call the hospital. He can't go back there yet. He just needs to rest. We'll get the car to the gas station sometime in the morning."

I went down on the couch, warmth, and happiness overcoming me even more than the fatigue. I was home. I could see my daughter, only a few feet away, and I had two women caring for me better than any other care I'd ever received. I tried to get out the fact that the car had to be there very early but could not stay awake long enough to get the words out. I had to change my bandages. I knew they were bleeding through, but I went out without being able to do much of anything.

I awoke in the late afternoon, still, on the couch. I'd been barely able to climb up on with help. The sun was low in the street-facing window. I smelled the aroma of baking pork. My first meal of solid food, the real meal, was to be what I could consume of a seven-pound pork roast my wife had purchased from the commissary at the Presidio Military Base near Golden Gate Bridge.

I was worried that I might not be able to either eat the roast or keep the food down, but I quickly found that I had nothing to worry about. I was starved;



once I started eating, I ate pounds of the hardened crackling skin and then the body of the roast. I ate until I could not put anything into my mouth anymore. Only after successfully consuming all the meat, potatoes, and gravy did I sit back. Both Pat and my wife were smiling and happy, but I quickly grew a bit worried. The next part of the eating adventure would involve the disconnected intestine and the operation of the colostomy bag. I had extra bags, plenty of them, and I'd been trained in how to clean the area, use the adhesive, and the replacement of the bag itself. My shortened intestinal tract would also expel the filtered and used material much quicker than if it was all working the way it should in a normal person.

I could only worry so much, however. The huge intake of food caused me to get sleepy, almost immediately. I climbed into the bed, remembering to let my wife know that I had to be up at six in the morning to get the car over to M&M if it was going to start and be drivable that far.

I went down hard and was asleep nearly instantly. I didn't wake up until there was a loud pounding on our front door. I gasped and rolled to get ready to get up.

I checked my colostomy bag but it was still empty. I checked the clock. It was six in the morning.

It was Mickey at the door. I cracked it open but he pushed it in and entered.

He was met by me, and then Pat, and my wife behind me in their robes. My daughter started to cry in the corner of our bedroom.

“Six,” Mickey said, “six,” he said again, repeating himself, but his tone quieting a good bit.

“Okay, okay,” I tried to mollify him. “I’ll get dressed and we’ll go.”

“That’s the blue rig out on the street?” he asked, but then kept talking. “No, you take your time wounded veteran, and I’ll get that thing over to the garage.” He held up a can of something, with a hose and some other attachments on it. “Ether,” he said, “any engine will run on ether, at least for a little while. You got the keys? Walk over when you get around to it.”

My wife reached over to the counter and grabbed the keys. She handed them to him.

“You must be a war hero, indeed,” Mickey said, with a big smile crossing his face. “You came home to two beautiful women.” He turned then and quickly went back down the steps, skipping them like a seaman aboard a ship.

“That’s who’s supposed to be fixing the car?” Pat asked after the door was closed and Mickey was gone. “He looks like he might be just right for putting Frankenstein back together again.”

“Yes,” my wife said, turning to enter the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. “Frankenstein! What a great name for that car.”

## Chapter XIII

The .45 was in the box it'd come in when the commanding general of the base at Quantico had awarded it to me. My wife had put it up, and as far back on the top shelf of our bedroom closet, as she could. She and Pat had taken Julie to the shopping center for some things I hadn't been informed about. I pulled the box down and opened it. An eight-by-eleven shiny picture of the general handing me the automatic was the first thing I saw as I opened the special box. I carefully removed the Colt from the red velvet interior of the oak wood box. The words "Clark Custom, Shreveport, La." burned once again into my forebrain. They were carved into the metal in cursive, not like the printing underneath that described the weapon itself. The Marine Corps Association had paid a lot of money to have the weapon specially accurized. I knew that because my dad had been in charge of the Coast Guard Pistol Team for years when I was younger. A Clark .22 or .45 was prized over all other accurized pieces for use in competition.

I sat with the Colt in my lap. It was the only weapon I'd touched since leaving the A Shau Valley. My right hand slowly, almost all on its own, curled around the grip. The gun was loaded with factory ball ammo since hollow points wouldn't explode effectively at the relatively slow speed a .45 bullet travels.

Possessing the Colt once more made me feel warm and secure, but, as I sat there breathing carefully in and out, I knew there was really no truth in that. Not for the place I'd returned to. There was no security in having a gun if using the gun would almost certainly involve going to prison, not to mention adding another to the many dead who haunted my waking, as well as nighttime, hours. I thought of the slime ball in the ward, who'd insulted both my wife and me. I'd shoot him in less than a heartbeat, and I'd shoot him several times, I knew. But I could not. I wasn't in the A Shau anymore. I was a training command Marine who would shortly not be a Marine anymore at all. I looked at the front door, closed against the middle of the living room wall across from me. My bullet placement would be perfectly executed if that man came through the door under threatening conditions.

I slowly tucked the unfired beautiful piece of collected metal shapes back into the box. I left one round in its chamber, just like I'd kept my .45 in the A Shau. The slide safety locking tang was stuck up into the slide locking safety notch on the side of the slide itself. I clicked the safety off, just once, and the sound seemed to echo through the whole living room before I re-engaged it. I was drawn to it, the sound, the automatic, the need to again experience the satisfaction of using it with great precision and application. The Colt was calling me back.

I closed the lid on the box, taking one last look at the photo of the general grinning, and me returning a grin. The photo hadn't aged, the gun hadn't aged, and

neither had the box, but I was so many years from where I'd been only seven months back, at the time the award was made, that it seemed like light-years. I couldn't go back without being back, and I wanted nothing ever to do again with the A Shau Valley or any situation that even distantly resembled the place or any of what had happened there. I put the box back exactly where my wife kept it, knowing that one day I would have to take it down to clean the automatic, but that day would not be now. The Colt knew it was there, waiting, and I knew the Colt was there, waiting. I was determined that it would wait a long time. If violence was to come out of my current environment, I was going to have to find another way of dealing with it.

I decided that there was no rush in heading over to M&M since Mickey would be doing whatever he was going to do to the GTO. I was window dressing, as I could do almost nothing to help him physically.

The fog lifted just before mid-day, so, after eating as much leftover pork as I could possibly take in, and working to fool with the ridiculous mess changing the colostomy bag turned out to be, I got fully dressed, changed my bloody abdominal four by four bandages, and headed for the garage. I limped along in the cold aftermath of the lifting fog, the sun beginning to shine and warming things up but not at a very rapid rate.

When I arrived at the station there was a customer waiting by a gas pump. I secretly hoped that the man, standing by the open driver's door of the vehicle might want new tires, as the twenty I'd gotten

the day before meant so much to my wife when I'd presented it to her. I walked around the pumps without encountering the man, and into the shop through the open bay door. Mickey was leaning over one fender of my open-hooded GTO while another man leaned over the other.

"Pump the damned gas," Mickey said to me, without any hello or other salutation, "unless you can sell the guy a set of tires." Both men laughed.

I went out to pump the gas, wondering if I was ever going to be treated with respect in my life at all. I'd thought, during Marine Officer training, that I would have automatic respect when that training was done, at least from Marines of lesser rank throughout the Corps, or certainly from those in any command, I served in. That had not turned out to be the case. Now, without money and without a running vehicle, I was once more like a freshman in college. I was the FNG, although I didn't have to walk the point, as in combat, or wear a beanie or do some other totally dumb stuff as I'd done in college, to prove I knew nothing.

I took the eight bucks the guy paid for his gas back into the garage. I held the money out to Mickey, but he pointed at the office, before going back to talking to the guy on the other side of the car, the guy wearing a big weird-looking curly-brimmed cowboy hat and smoking a cigar. The office was empty. It took me several seconds to figure out how to open the money drawer on the register. When it sprang open I was amazed. The slots were filled with cash of all

denominations. I carefully put the five and three ones in their proper places, very much aware that the slots for ten and twenty-dollar bills were pretty much stuffed. I frowned, closed the drawer, and went back out to the mechanic's bay, wondering if I was being tested. Who leaves cash like that laying around and sends somebody almost unknown to check it out?

"This is Smokey," Thompson said, staring down into the mess the engine bay of my GTO had become. It was like the entire engine had been taken apart, and then the parts heaped back into the open space where the whole assembled engine had been.

I stared down, ignoring the smoking man, noting in the back of my mind that there was no smoke in the garage or coming from the man's cigar, even though it was in the guy's mouth.

"Engine's shot, from one end to the other," Mickey said, his tone analytical and seemingly uncaring. "The block's cracked, the crank's toast, and the heads can't even be milled back into shape. I don't have an engine for this thing, not that'll be allowed under E-Stock rules at the NHRA event. You take this thing anywhere to get an estimate before talking to me?"

The question surprised me. I almost said no, then remembered the failure of a phone call I'd made to the Sears and Roebuck garage. I told Mickey about it, and the hopeless part wherein I had to admit that I had no money or almost none. I did have the twenty Mickey had given me from the day before. I didn't

bother to admit my wife had gone shopping with that twenty only hours before, however.

Mickey and Smokey looked at one another for a few seconds, saying nothing.

"What is it?" I asked, wondering what was on their mind. The guy at Sears had said he wouldn't do it without the money.

"I'll call him," Mickey said, 'unless you want to,' he went on, obviously speaking to Smokey.

"Nah, they're sponsoring one of my cars," Smokey replied, taking the cigar from his mouth, and tapping it on my GTO's fender as if the cigar really had any ash to be tapped off of it. "I don't want to appear taking advantage."

"What are you going to call about?" I asked, having no clue what the two men were getting at.

"Listen and learn," Smokey replied, as Mickey headed for the office.

I trailed along. Smokey took one of the three chairs while Mickey pulled a rotary phone from under the counter, which was too small for anything other than the big metal cash register that sat atop it.

It took minutes for Mickey to come up with a number from information, never bothering to ask me whether I still had the number, which I didn't, anyway.

"This is Mickey Thompson," Mickey said aggressively into the phone after dialing. "Yes, that Mickey Thompson," he went on after a slight delay. "Let me talk to what's his name, the shop manager there, I'll hold." Mickey clutched the phone to his



chest, smiling over at Smokey broadly. "See, they've heard of me, not like you," he said.

"To their embarrassment and chagrin," Smokey replied.

I noted that Smokey's southern twang or accent was totally out of character with the words he used when he spoke.

"You got a Marine, shot to shit in Vietnam, recovering from his wounds and his GTO won't run," Mickey said into the handset, to my complete surprise. "You said you could rebuild his engine but he needed six hundred bucks so you turned him down. How in the hell is that story going to play when Smokey and I get to Half Moon Bay and run at Winter Nationals?"

"How big of you," Mickey said. "How about twenty bucks a month, first month due the last day of next month?"

Mickey clutched the phone to his chest once more and turned to me. "You can afford twenty a month by the end of next month, right?" he whispered.

I nodded. My pay, plus expense money for living off base, came to about four hundred and fifty dollars, dependent, of course, on my pay records catching up with me.

"And he needs one of those CLC credit cards you guys give out like candy," Mickey said.

I had no idea what Mickey was talking about. I just stared at the man without being able to say much of anything.

“Fine, how about four hundred dollars in credit, the twenty percent Sears discount and take the first twenty bucks out on the rebuild?”

I knew I was inside a game wherein I didn’t know the rules. Mickey was making decisions for me that I knew had the patina of good news but I couldn’t be certain. All of a sudden, it came to me. He was like the Gunny. Somehow, I was being tossed about decisions to make that I had no choice in making the way he wanted me to. I had no experience or data to ground anything, and I was being given no time.

“When the Marine calls on you, make sure you require that he bring his wife with him,” Mickey concluded. “She wears the shortest skirt in all of San Francisco.”

He hung up the phone and started to laugh. Smokey laughed with him, pulling the unsmoked cigar from between his lips, and taking his cowboy hat off for the first time.

“That true?” Smokey asked. Both he and Mickey looked over at me.

“Is what true?” I asked back

“That your wife wears the shortest skirt in all of San Francisco?” Smokey said.

“Where do you guys get this stuff from, some kind of late-night comedy routine?” I asked, nervously, because, afraid to alienate the only people who seemed to be helping me. I was still suffering some discomfort from the treatment the inmate in the ward had given my wife and me.

The two men stopped laughing.

“What’s a CLC card?” I asked.

“That’s a revolving credit card that gives you twenty percent off anything you buy at Sears, although the shop isn’t really part of the organization,” Smokey replied. “The shop’s a contract place, but it all works fine. Your new card will only work at Sears stores or contractors of Sears who agree, so ask first.”

“Why did you mention that we might be taking advantage of Sears?” I asked, Smokey’s comment sticking in my mind.

“The engines shot,” Mickey said. “We got an Isky racing cam, some solid lifters, and a bit more, but the car’s engine needs a new block, pistons, heads, radiator, and probably a generator to boot. That bill alone will come to just under a grand, at least, not counting labor, guarantee, and whatever, before you get it back and we take it apart to make it go faster.”

“So, Sears is getting stuck with a pig in a poke, all for taking care of some wounded veteran?” I replied, not feeling very comfortable.

“Smokey?” Mickey said, turning to look at his friend.

“They make a fortune in advertising off of Mickey and me, and many of our friends. They only pay by doing us favors and giving us stuff they don’t want anymore or can’t sell. It’s an even trade, pretty much, but if there’s an imbalance, believe me, it’s in their favor.”

My mind raced. My wife and I were getting a four-hundred-dollar credit card from Sears, a twenty

percent across-the-counter discount there, the GTO repaired and guaranteed for twenty dollars a month we didn't have to pay for quite some time and there was something else, I realized. I wanted to work with Mickey and Smokey if I could. I had nothing to cling to except the inside of a small apartment, a lovely daughter too young to really know me, and a wife who was going to grow tired of me hanging around only to be cared for. Mickey and Smokey stared at me, neither man saying a word. I realized, after a moment of silence, that they were waiting.

I could get the car back from Sears and then disappear, I knew, but I couldn't do that. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to go to the track, watch the car work being done and live again. I would pump gas or do any other menial chores to be a part of that.

"Okay, I'm in," I finally said, wondering if it was the right thing, the thing they were expecting.

"We knew," Mickey replied, smiling.

"How did you know?" I asked, surprised, not at me being in but why they might have doubted, given all that seemed to be getting done for me, that I might not be.

"Mickey talked to me," Smokey said, taking the cigar from his mouth. "What choice do you have?"

"And you're a Marine," Mickey said, "When do they want you back on full duty?"

The question came from nowhere. I hadn't and didn't want to think about the coming heavy-duty surgery, going back into that hospital or entrusting my

life to people I didn't want to be around, much less allow to decide whether I lived or died.

"Plenty of time for that, I presume, or you'd be telling us," Mickey said, somehow sensing my inability to want to come to terms with the answer. I'll pull the goat in the morning and haul it over there. Got a wrecker down at my yard. You'll have to go in later in the day to get your card. You can use the 442. You got a driver's license, by the way?"

"I do," I answered, not sure I did. I hadn't looked at the Virginian license I'd gotten while at the Basic School since returning home, but I presumed it hadn't timed out in little more than a year since it was issued.

"You'll need the license to get your card, as I'm not sure they honor military identity cards."

I was once again surprised at just how much Mickey seemed to know about everything. The Gunny had been like that.

"My wife..." I started, but Smokey cut me off before I could get out another word.

"You don't have to take your wife, that was just Mickey and me playing with you," he said, "having a beautiful wife should always be a wonderful benefit but everyone doesn't see it or use it that way."

"Stay and work for a while so I can get these cars out of here," Mickey said, looking over at me while moving away from the edge of the counter he'd been leaning on.

"I've got to get rid of these cars promised to people before I can run the GTO inside, and go to work on it. It's gonna take a few days for Sears to put

that mess together, so we have time. The race is in three weeks, so there's that, as well."

"What are you running Smokey?" Mickey asked.

"Just along for the show, this time around," Smokey replied.

"A little advice here and there wouldn't hurt, before the big day," Mickey said.

"I'll check in, you know that," Smokey replied, then got up and went out to his car, which was a Chevy Camaro.

I was surprised. The car seemed just like a regular car, yet the man had the aura and knowledge of a racer, especially given that Mickey seemed to hold him in very high regard about advising him on making the GTO go faster.

There wasn't much work to be done. I tried a few times to approach Mickey while he worked in the garage but he didn't want to talk while he worked. Mostly, I sat in the office and watched the traffic go by, or when someone came in for gas tried to spend as much time talking to the customer as I could.

I left in mid-afternoon, after calling my wife several times on the under-the-counter phone. No calls ever came into the station. I wondered if, should they, would Mickey even answer them. It was another mystery with no solution I could think of, and it wasn't worth bothering Mickey about. The man was wonderful in some ways and a terror in others. I did not have the CLC card, the car back, or anything without Mickey Thompson, and I wasn't about to screw getting those things if I could help it.

The walk home was exhausting. I'd changed bandages several times during the hours I'd been gone, but still, the blood seeped through to my shirt, only my Marine green sweater holding it back and giving me the appearance of being okay. I was hungry again, and that made me feel good. I was gaining strength but didn't really have it yet, not in full, anyway.

Once home I worked to get up the stairs, one at a time, one foot up, and then raising and setting the other next to it, and so on. My wife heard me coming and opened the door, but she didn't come out to help, guessing that I needed to navigate on my own all I could.

Once inside, I went straight to the bathroom to take care of the bag on the side of my belly. The pork had processed through and I wasn't happy about the result. Although I was afraid of the coming surgery I also wanted it to come as quickly as possible. I knew I couldn't live my life with the bag. I wouldn't live the rest of my life that way.

I talked to my wife about everything that'd transpired. She took it all in. I even told her about the joke Mickey and Smokey made about her wearing mini-skirts. She didn't laugh, which didn't surprise me, but what she said next definitely did.

"We get the car back, repaired and in good shape, and have to pay twenty dollars a month after your pay starts again," she said, finally. "We get a Sears card for four hundred dollars, plus a twenty percent discount from them, and you get to spend

some time walking back and forth to that gas station. I'd wear whatever kind of skirt they wanted me to for all that."

I looked at her. She wasn't smiling. I started to smile though. I'd married a very special woman and it was only really beginning to become clear to me the depth of her intellect and her drive to make our family work.

My daughter crawled across the rug and pulled herself up on the small table in front of the couch where I sat. She stood, looking very seriously at me, before saying "Da," which I'd come to know as her word for me. I wasn't at all sure that someone so young could understand what was being said, but both she and I seemed to understand. I held out one hand, and, rocking unsteadily, she took it.

My life was changed, and the changes for the good were just beginning to become evident to me. Everyone had decided some time back that I was going to live, but I hadn't made that decision for myself, until sitting where I was in that place and time at that exact moment.



## Chapter XIV

I'd been home for a week before my first contact came in from Oak Knoll, but it wasn't from the medical side. It was from Johannson, the Marine Corps liaison officer both Mary and I'd dealt with when I was in the ward with the other prisoners. The call came in at seven a.m. which was unusual. Nobody called at seven a.m.

Thompson might show up, which he'd done before seven on three occasions, more to see Mary than I, or so I thought. His excuse was always the same; he needed to open early for one reason or another, and he'd gotten used to my pumping the gas for his patrons. My other job was answering the phone, although I never really got to talk to anybody because everyone calling in wanted to talk only to Mickey. I'd drag the phone, on its super-long extension cord, out to the garage and hand it over. When he yelled, I'd go get the thing and clean it because Mickey didn't believe in using gloves to work on cars. I tried not to look at my GTO because it was such a mess. He'd even taken the doors off, and then fully apart. What could doors have to do with drag racing? I just shook my head and kept my mouth shut.

"Drag racing is all about the applying of sufficient power to the rubber, then getting that rubber to stick properly to the concrete, and finally balance and lastly

the driving,” he’d once said, answering a question I’d never asked.

I didn’t really understand more than half of what he said or meant, but I made believe I did. He was an expert at making cars go fast. I was an expert at calling artillery. Those were not sympathetic pursuits, and although I could understand his area of expertise, it wasn’t likely he could ever come to understand mine.

The work at the shop intensified, as Mickey brought in friends who never much spoke, and I never really engaged with. I was just the gas station attendant, as far as they were concerned, as it appeared Mickey never discussed the car’s owner, or my existence, with them. Every chance I got I spent hanging in the garage, trying to figure out what was being done to the GTO. Mickey would occasionally mention what he was doing but, as for the rest, I had to figure it out for myself because when Mickey was working he didn’t want to answer questions, whatsoever. And, if the bell rang, and I was still in the shop, then he’d start bellowing until I was out of there.

“God damned Jaguar,” Mickey said from under the car one morning.

Finally, the GTO was up on the single lift the garage had, although the lift only went up about four feet, not high enough for anyone to stand fully erect under it.

“They design fantastically but then can’t mechanically figure out how to hold things in properly,” Mickey said. “The English can’t build a

decent car to save their lives.”

I looked at the complexity of the system he was working to install under the left front wheel well. I realized it was a disc brake, with all the parts still attached.

“Why do we need disc brakes,” I asked, not being able to stop myself. My curiosity was just too great. “The track has to have a long flat surface past the quarter-mile since I know they run AA Fuel dragsters there.”

“Shut up, and find something to do,” Mickey yelled, sticking his head out, while two of his guys held part of the assembly up to the chassis. “Because the car is going to go just as fast on the street as it is on the track, that’s why. How the hell are you going to stop it out there when racing is over? Sure as hell not with the totally shitty drum brakes Americans stick on there.”

That seemed at odds with what he’d said earlier about English cars but I let it go.

“Where did he get the Jaguar disc brakes from?” I whispered to one of the men standing just outside the open garage door smoking a Marlboro.

“Appropriated from another job,” the man replied, shrugging his shoulders.

The man’s face was so deadpan and his expression so ‘of course’ that I had to believe him. I decided right then that Mickey might be a wild, wonderful, and genuine guy, but he was also dangerous. I went to the office smiling to myself, to await the arrival of another innocent citizen low on

gas. Of the four things Mickey certainly was, it was that last one I thought I could handle with the most comfort.

Maybe the Marine Corps would send me to some other state where nobody could find me if it kept me at all. How many of the parts in my car would be on some hot list of 'misplaced' items I had no idea, but jail or prison, I suddenly realized, would be as nothing compared to inhabiting the A Shau Valley.

The Sears charge card came in the mail the next day. I was surprised by the fact that the card was not made of plastic but of embossed paper like it wasn't real at all. The letter that accompanied it had good news buried inside it, however. The amount of credit I had at any Sears store or affiliate was eight hundred dollars, not four hundred, or even six hundred. I'd paid twenty-two hundred for the GTO, and still owed most of that to the Navy Federal Credit Union, so the eight hundred dollars, nearly twice what I made in lieutenant's pay for a month, was something, indeed.

My wife was blown away by the card. Her father was a middle manager at the downtown Sears headquarters in Chicago. The CLC card was a coveted item. I didn't mention that her father would never likely have gotten us one. That took a bizarre drag racing nut in a run-down San Francisco gas station.

"Cafeterias," she said, waving the card at me with a smile.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, befuddled.

“They have restaurants and cafeterias in all the big stores,” she replied. “We won’t starve.”

I hadn’t thought of starvation, even in the deepest corners of my mind, but my wife was Irish, one step removed from County Claire back in the old country.

The drag racing track at Half Moon Bay proved not to be a stand-alone track at all. Instead, it was set on an isolated back landing strip of the Half Moon Bay airport.

I was surprised. I didn’t get to ride in my GTO to the track because Mickey wouldn’t let the car be driven on the street until it was converted back into what he called ‘civilian’ use. I thought he’d made the decision to tow the vehicle because of safety, but one of the guys that hung around him corrected me.

“Nah, he doesn’t want the ‘dial-in’ messed with, and the rear slicks are screwed into the rims so regular street cornering messes with their ability to hold air.”

I realized, at that point, that Mickey was all racer, and couldn’t care less how cars performed out on the street. His own Oldsmobile 442 was wonderfully quick and of very high quality, but it was unmodified in any way, including to make it go faster.

“Why is the track part of the airport?” I asked Mickey when he stepped back from under the hood, as he prepped the car for its first practice run.

“Because it’s made of concrete, not asphalt,” Mickey replied. “Asphalt has oil in it, so it’s too

slippery for burning out, and concrete takes the wear when the Fuelies run.”

There were no spectators at the track, only mechanics, drivers, owners, and some people who ran the place. To me, it was boring, smelly, noisy, and filled with people all smoking cigarettes around surfaces covered with gasoline and alcohol.

The GTO ran to what Mickey called ‘specification.” The lights at the end of the quarter-mile lit up with 103 miles per hour in fourteen seconds. “We’ll tune next time,” he said, once we got into the cab of the tow truck. I didn’t know what ‘tuning’ really meant but presumed it was stuff like adjusting the floats on the three carburetors or changing the spark plugs.

The telephone seldom rang under M&M’s small front counter. I answered it and, to my surprise, it was Mary, my wife.

“Thanks,” I replied, after her short message. “I’ll be home in a bit.” I hung up the phone, and then slowly put it and the base back under the counter. Mary’s message had been short and to the point. Oak Knoll’s surgical team wanted to evaluate my condition for immediate surgery since they had a specialist visiting from back east. I stood at the counter, frozen, the crummy Zenith portable radio blaring out the Animals singing the last stanza of the House of the Rising Sun: *“Well, there is a house in New Orleans, they call the Rising Sun, and it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy, and God, I know I’m one.”*

“A poor boy,” I whispered in the silence, after the song was over, and before another could come on, “and I know I’m one.”

I had to get to Oak Knoll tomorrow. It was Tuesday. The big E-Stock Eliminator race was set for only a little more than three weeks away. How could I recover enough to attend the race in that short of a time? My last serious surgery had taken almost six weeks to come back from, and I hadn’t been fully ambulatory even then.

I realized that I had nobody to talk to about what was coming. My wife would not understand at all that I was concerned about being well enough after the surgery to attend some auto race, any kind of race. She, and Pat, no doubt, would take the position that I ought to be worried about surviving, getting home, seeing my rapidly growing daughter, and thinking other such more proper family thoughts rather than going to a loud, low-class running of our only car in a race populated by mechanics, owners, and spectators who might be considered cultural rejects, if such a generous definition was allowed.

The race was important to me, as was the effort that had so far been made on my, and my family’s behalf. I stared out the window at the passing traffic. A swept-back sixty-six Chevy pulled off the street and slowly moved to the side of one of the inside pumps. I inhaled deeply, pulled my shoulders back, and went out to pump gas. As I walked out, I thought about my life. I was a college graduate, an officer in the Marine Corps, and a combat veteran of some distinction, but

here I was, pumping gas as my primary purpose in life. I moved around the back of the beautiful car, an Impala SS, and approached the driver's window. I smiled down at the woman, who was smiling back at me. She didn't know why I was smiling because of something she could probably not imagine if I told her. I was smiling because I was happier pumping gas than at being all the other things I was or had become in life and because it was something, anything, to do.

The woman, wearing giant sunglasses, with her hair wrapped up and around with some kind of cloth, held out two one-dollar bills.

"Can I put regular gas in this car?" she asked. "It's my husband's car. Usually, I'm not allowed to drive it, but I've got to get down to Rockaway beach, and it's on empty."

I stood back from the car and looked toward the lead edge of the left fender. There was no mistaking the 327 located just above the crossed racing flags on the emblem. The engine had to be one of the higher output 300 horsepower units, I knew, to be in an SS.

"You need premium, the 93-octane stuff, or you might hurt the valves," I replied, watching the smile disappear from her face. The premium price was twenty cents a gallon above the 29-cent regular. It wasn't likely the woman was going to make a 70-mile round trip in an Impala SS on about four gallons of gas. Even driven as conservatively as possible, the car wasn't going to see much more than ten miles per gallon.



"I'll have to risk it," the woman said, after a few seconds of consideration, pushing the two one-dollar bills toward me.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, crumpling up the money and sticking it in my pocket. "Pull forward to the other pump," I instructed the woman.

The woman frowned at me, but then pulled the car forward until the back of the car was just past the pump.

I knew the gas cap was located under the hinged license plate, although I couldn't remember how I knew that. I took the pump handle down, pulled up on the lever to turn the machine, and then squatted down near the center of the Impala's rear bumper. The license plate pulled down, just as I'd somehow known it would.

I inserted the handle's nozzle into the tank filler and squeezed the trigger. I held it down for about a full minute, before letting up, enjoying the smell of the raw gasoline fumes as they surrounded me. Then I stood up and back, returning the handle to the pump. I shut it off and looked down at the woman.

The pump read 10.7 gallons.

I walked over to the woman's window.

"You pumped more than you should have, didn't you, and you put the expensive stuff in," she said, taking her sunglasses off in order to look at me closer.

"You'll have no trouble making it there and back," I said, not being able to think of anything else to say, other than the fact that I'd just stolen about four bucks worth of gas from Mickey Thompson.

She leaned away from the window for a few seconds, bending down to get something nearby on the seat next to her.

“Here, that’s my husband’s card,” she said, sticking a gold embossed little white card out the window. “He’s a lieutenant on the police department. I’ll tell him what you did later. If you get in trouble just say you’re the kid from the gas station.”

The woman started the Chevy and pulled away, turned sharply to her left, and then entered the traffic passing by on the street. The 327 growled throatily as she accelerated the SS, but the rear wheels didn’t break loose.

I pulled the two bucks from my pocket, as I headed for the office to put the money in the register. “Thomas O’Boyle, Lieutenant, Traffic Division,” the card read, with contact address and information below. I put the money in the register but stuck the card into my wallet. One never knew. I also wondered why the woman had called me a kid. I’d been a ‘kewpie doll’ looking person not long ago, and now I was a kid. When was I ever going to be taken seriously?

The surgery was serious, that much I was certain of, and my own fear with respect to it. I was doing everything I could not to think about that. I didn’t want to go under general anesthesia again, much less come out of it in extreme agony.

But there was nothing to be done for it. I already knew what the evaluation would find. I was gaining weight and feeling stronger every day. I’d pass the

inspection. I limped when I walked, but not terribly so, and I could make the trip to the gas station in only a couple of minutes instead of my first attempts, which had taken almost a quarter of an hour. I was going to be declared good enough to cut up again. I felt the slippery plastic bag snuggled between the lower part of my shirt on my left side and my skin. It would all be worth it, I knew, but still.

Once more, I stared out the window, leaning against the wall, trying to press my shoulders against its surface. I could not stand straight. The more I pushed against the wall, however, the more I stretched the incision running up and down the front of my torso. Finally, I had to give up and sit down. My hip hurt, my incision hurt, and my mind was filled with a dull fear. Not the terror, like that of combat in the valley, but the enduring central feeling of worry about the unknown that just stayed with me, like the never-ending awareness that I wore a plastic bag on my stomach.

Two Harley Davidson motorcycles pulled up to the inner pump closest to the office door. I looked through the window, waiting for the recurring blasts of their deep beating engines to come to an end.

I went out through the door, curious as to the men who might be riding such machines. They were both big brawny men, much like the Marines I'd trained with at Quantico.

I didn't know whether Harleys took ethyl or regular gas, but I didn't get a chance to ask.

“Hey, gimp,” one of the men said, both having dismounted the big bikes and balancing them on nearly invisible kickstands. “Put the good stuff in,” the man went on as if he’d read my mind.

“Chester,” I murmured, unscrewing the big gas cap from the center of the front Harley’s tank.

“What?” the man asked.

“The gimp thing, like Chester from Gunsmoke,” I replied, smiling.

“More like Quasimodo,” the man said back, then both started laughing.

“Not very complimentary,” I remarked, filling the tank with ethyl from the pump, making certain not to overfill it, “but then, at least you’ve done some elementary schooling, since you know the book or the movie the character’s from.”

The men stopped laughing and looked at one another.

“You may be a skinny know-nothing crippled kid, but your mouth can still get you in a lot of trouble,” the other man said.

Both men faced me, as I moved to the second bike.

I looked down at the tank of that cycle. There was a very small Vietnam representation of the Vietnamese flag next to the cap. I realized it was a plastic cut out of the Vietnam Service Ribbon, and across from it was another cut out of a Purpleheart.

“You been to the Nam,” I said, unscrewing the cap, and plunging the pump handle in.

“You said it correctly,” the first man replied, a small bit of wonder in his tone, “not that Nam crap, rhyming it with jam.”

“Yeah,” I replied, “The Nam, like in bomb.”

Both men laughed together.

“Who were you with?” the second man asked.

“Marines, A Shau Valley,” I replied. There were all kinds of possible answers to the question he’d asked, but I wanted to cut to the chase as quickly as possible. There was no point in getting even gently hit in my current condition.

“Con Tien, both of us,” the first man said. “When you get out?”

“Not out,” I said, finishing filling the gas tank, and then screwing the cap back on.

“Still in,” I went on, “just on medical leave to heal up before the next surgery at Oak Knoll.”

“Shit hole, Oak Knoll,” the second man said.

“Lookin’ kind of that way,” I replied.

“Sorry about the comments earlier,” the first man said, holding out his hand. “Both Marines,” he said. “I was staff and he was a buck under me. I didn’t get hit, but one small chunk of mortar took off his little finger a bit.”

The second man, the former buck sergeant, waggled what was left of his left little finger. It wasn’t much.

“No offense,” I said, heading back for the office door.

“What was your rank?” the staff sergeant asked from behind me.

I breathed in and out shallowly, not wanting to tell them that I was an officer. I didn't need any trouble, but there was no way around it.

"Lieutenant," I tossed over my shoulder, heading through the door.

"Sir," the staff sergeant said, which surprised me so much that I twisted around, causing my hip and central incision to knife through with pain. I winced and bent my knee slightly, as I recovered myself.

"You didn't get hit in the little finger, I'm presuming, sir," the buck sergeant said, grabbing the door with his right hand to hold it open.

"Hey, thanks guys, but I got to sit down for a minute or two," I replied, turning to put myself onto one of the three chairs strewn about the small area.

The two men came into the office after me. The staff sergeant took out a twenty and put it on the edge of the counter, then picked up a pencil lying next to the small white pad Mickey kept there to make notes on when he was on the phone. He started writing.

"Here's how you can reach us if you need us," the staff sergeant said, "we're in the moving business just down the street when not hanging out on our bikes."

I was recovering myself so I didn't say anything, I just nodded.

Both men left, the buck sergeant throwing me a regulation salute once he got aboard his bike and got it going. I didn't salute back, merely nodding again.

They were gone, in seconds, the scattered, yet syncopated roar of their two-cylinder machines disappearing out into the sparse traffic.

I got up and eased my way to the counter. Their gas bill couldn't be more than six bucks, or so, I knew, although I couldn't read the small numbers on the pump from where I was. A fourteen-dollar tip. Once again, very meaningful to me in my current situation, and twice in two days, I'd been given identity information from people who might help me if I was in trouble. I laughed out loud when I read their names. Tom and Jerry, like in the cartoons.

I went out to check the pump. The tip was actually a little more than fifteen dollars. I moved back inside to the register and made the change, pocketing the difference, wondering if Mickey ever bothered to true up the amount of money in the register. I didn't know if I was trusted or not, although the answer to that question didn't appear to be too important at the moment.

I smiled to myself. Both NCOs had called me sir, and that felt good, especially when I was headed back into Oak Knoll where it wasn't likely anyone would treat me with any respect at all, and that was if I lived. I wasn't afraid of dying during the surgery. I was now a known drug addict, however, no doubt wrote into my chart and file, even though I'd come through the brutal detox on my own. What I was really worried about was whether I'd be getting any pain drugs following the surgery. I knew at the center of my very core that I

couldn't handle the kind of pain that had to be lying in wait, just ahead, again.



## Chapter XV

My wife drove Mickey's 442, since she wouldn't let me drive, as we made our way to Highway 280, then 80 across the Bay Bridge, onto 580 to head back south to where the hospital was set back on Mountain Boulevard some distance from the MacArthur Freeway.

"Why do all the freeways from home to here end in eighty?" I asked, inanely from the passenger seat, Julie sitting in my lap.

Mary didn't answer. We'd argued about the driving. I was fit to drive but she thought my mental condition was a bit tattered because of the coming surgery. I could see no sign of that myself but there was little point in arguing. If they kept me at the hospital, which I'd packed my small canvas sack for, then Mary would return home, leaving Julie with Pat and drive Mickey's car back to the station. I knew she liked the Oldsmobile but also that she hated the wind blowing because the convertible top was down. For some reason, the electric motor operating the top would not function and I'd not wanted to mention any kind of complaint to Mickey.

Mary parked the car, against my wishes, in the emergency medical parking, the part of the lot reserved for medical personnel. I was fine to walk the longer distance from visitor parking, but I'd lost my

decision-making powers once the trip had begun. She carried Julie on her right hip and I swung my small bag of shaving and toothpaste stuff as we went.

The emergency waiting room was actually the most ambient space in the hospital that we'd found so far. Mary would wait there with Julie until a decision was made about my surgical decision and any schedule.

I took the elevator up to dirty surgery and headed for the nurse's desk. Lieutenant Johansson stood, leaning against the counter, talking to a couple of the nurses on duty.

I moved to where he stood, standing a couple of feet back from the counter, not knowing what to expect.

"You won't be going back into the lockup if that's what's on your mind," he said, noting my reticence to approach any of them.

There was no answer to that comment I could think of. "Thank you," seemed totally out of place, so I said nothing. That Johansson was trying to be so solicitous and nice alerted me to the fact that I was probably emanating some of my interior fear about what I knew had to be coming. I looked at the very squared away lieutenant in his Class A Green Uniform. The only reason I could think of about wearing my own uniforms was the fact that they were so tightly tailored that they'd hold me together better than about anything else I could wear. However, there was no cause to wear a uniform, and the cleaning and pressing bills alone, if not living or working on a

Marine Base, were beyond my current capability to pay.

I was ushered into a small room already occupied by several men, all dressed in surgical attire.

A tall man with short gray hair, a thin mustache, and a short goatee stood up, turned around, and then looked intently at me.

"This then is the patient?" he asked, apparently to nobody in particular.

"Lieutenant patient at your service," I replied, making sure not to smile.

The man's intent stare didn't flicker a bit, as he turned, faced the other men, and then sat in the chair he'd been in when I walked into the room.

"We'll need three or four hours of time in the morning to perform a complete exploratory laparotomy. Prep is at zero-five-thirty and the team should be positioned, ready and available by seven. The patient will be sedated and wheeled to surgery on a hard gurney.

"You can go," one of the other two men, sitting across from the laconic and analytical surgeon said, waving me back toward the door I'd come through.

I made my way back to the emergency room waiting area where my wife waited. There was no way I was going to tell her about just what an arrogant ass the surgeon had turned out to be. There was nothing to be done for it. I was stuck where I was and going under the knife in the morning. All I could do would be to worry her more.

"I'm going to stay the night and be prepped early tomorrow morning," I told her. "The surgery should start at seven a.m. and be quick. There are no complications they can think of without opening me up, but the surgeon is world famous at this. You better let the nurse's station upstairs know where you'll be."

"No, I'll wait outside of surgery upstairs," she replied. "How long?"

"Three hours, or maybe less," I replied, having no real clue.

I hadn't liked the phrase 'complete exploratory laparotomy' at all. A laparotomy was the opening from stem to stern, up and down, of the entire torso. It was about the most serious and extensive surgery a human being could have, short of an autopsy.

Mary left but was back early in the morning. I didn't think to ask her about how she'd made the trip, my concentration focused almost exclusively on holding my building fear in check.

When they came to get me, I was ready. The young doctor wasn't present, only the tall mustache and goatee surgeon with no personality, and no name tag.

"Valium?" he asked Edith, the RN who stood nearby.

"Nothing," she replied, being kind enough not to mention my now well-known addictive problem. She did smile weakly at me; her brow furrowed a bit.

"Twenty milligrams," the doctor said. "I'll be back. He's going to need it."

Edith returned only moments later to push the drug into my I.V. The effect was instant. I was not only calm about going into serious potentially life-threatening surgery, I was happy about it. I realized that morphine and Demerol weren't the only drugs that really worked.

My wife held my hand until I was ready to go, and then Edith took over, but there was no more hand-holding. With two attendants she helped lift me onto a gurney they'd wheeled in. There were no goodbyes or any of that. Edith took me away, back into the world of passing white chicklet lights on the ceilings of the halls.

I didn't come out of surgery into consciousness. I came out of it in some sort of different state of reality recognition, without reality being anything I was ready for. A Catholic priest peered down, his face protruding from his bent-over position, as he did whatever a priest was supposed to be doing at the time. I looked into his eyes, noting the white-collar and the black outfit. My mind went back to the First Med in Da Nang when the priest had been administering the Last Rights to me as my gurney was wheeled into surgery. My fear back then had been much greater than what I experienced looking up into the man's eyes.

I reached my right arm upward and grabbed his arm as hard as I could, my hand clamped with as much pressure as I could generate, around his neck.

"I need morphine," I whispered, with as much energy as I could manage, the words coming out low and raspy.

"I'll get it," he whispered back, trying to pry my choking hand from his throat.

He finally freed himself and stepped back to stand next to my wife.

"I think he already had a pain shot a bit ago," Mary said to him.

I stared, all the energy I'd gathered together to assault the priest now completely gone.

"I don't care," the priest said, still looking into my eyes. Slowly he turned and then disappeared from my narrow field of view.

"Where am I?" I asked my wife, as she moved closer to peer more comfortably down at me over the protective rail.

"It's the morning of the third day," she replied, her voice soft and caring.

"The third day of what?" I asked, feeling my forehead curl and eyebrows come together in real question.

"The third day after the surgery," she replied.

My right hand plunged, seemingly on its own, down and across the front of my torso. The bag was gone. I ran the hand softly up and down, then over and around, crisscrossing the many thick bandages taped to my belly and sides, as far as it could reach. There was no crinkle or plastic encountered, either under or atop the bandages, that I could detect. There was no bag.

Edith appeared and pushed the yellow liquid into my I.V., smiled, and then was gone. I presumed she knew how much of what I could or could not have.

The drug began to kick in, beginning to take me away, I realized, although the euphoria of no longer having a colostomy bag was as overwhelming as the effect of the pain and mind-numbing drug.

“Why, three days?” I asked, trying to comprehend what my wife had said.

“The surgery was twelve hours,” she replied. “I think it was some sort of record around here.”

“What did they do?” I asked, befuddled a bit. The surgeon had said that I’d be under for a few hours just before the anesthesia mask had been strapped over my nose and mouth.

“They had to take out your gall bladder too,” my wife replied. “It had gall stones the size of golf balls. The doctor said it was because they gave you the wrong blood in Da Nang.”

I thought for a moment about what she’d said. The pain that had been so terrible might have had a lot to do with the stones, but the blood type thing couldn’t be right. I was AB positive. I was a universal recipient. I could, supposedly, get blood from any other type and have it work just fine.

Edith appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, at the foot of my bed. She checked my chart, made a notation with a pen in her free hand, and then came around the side of the bed across from where my wife stood.

“He’s doing fine,” she whispered as if she wasn’t allowed to give out such information. “Prognosis good and condition good, which is saying something after what he’s been through. The surgeon said you’re

tougher than shoe leather, which surprised us all...I mean, that he would say something so human."

Without saying anything further, Edith left the room.

"How's everything at home?" I asked, wondering how Julie and Pat were doing.

"Thompson has been over every morning to see how you're doing," my wife said. "Apparently, he'll have to register the car and title to himself, at least as far as they're concerned, in order to enter it into the race since you may not be there."

"Oh, I don't know why," I breathed out, "and the GTO's really owned by the Federal Credit Union, at least for two more years," I went on.

In truth, I couldn't create much interest within myself about the car or anything else except my own survival and trying to find some position or place of physical comfort.

"I've been unconscious for three days?" I asked the nurse, a woman I didn't know.

She'd walked into the room to check my chart, but not said anything until I broached the question.

"No, you've been conscious since about twelve hours following the surgery," she replied, her voice very matter-of-fact, "you have no memory of the three days?"

"He's fine," my wife said to the nurse before I could answer. She moved down the side of the bed until she was only a few feet from her.

"He's fine," she repeated, forcefully.

The nurse backed up a few feet.



“Okay, I’m sure you’re right,” she said, before turning and heading on out of the room.

“You were gone the whole time,” Mary said, coming back up the side of the bed to once again lean down over me. “You were gone until you asked where you were, and then I knew, plus you went after a pain shot, which you didn’t care about for three days and nights. I thought I’d lost you. I don’t want you stuck in here with psychologists, at least not just yet, so keep as quiet as you can.”

She didn’t cry, but I knew she was close. It hadn’t occurred to me just how much pressure, worry, and fright must have piled up on her shoulders and more. I’d been concerned almost totally about my own survival.

I wanted to tell her so much about how I was going to be okay, get off the morphine and get back to being normal again, but the effect of the shot would allow none of that. I slowly sank down into the pleasant morass it opened up under me without my being able to say one more word.

The days passed faster than the nights, which were stuttered and segmented with periods of hallucination from the pain drugs to actual memories of what had happened in the A Shau Valley. I took to sleeping with the light on, as I had no roommate. There was a spare bed in the room but it was never filled by anyone. I wondered if the staff was trying to make up for their previous behavior toward me, but there was also no social life on the floor until I could get ambulatory. My wife visited every day but could

not bring my daughter because of the nature of the dirty surgery floor. I was able to get out of bed on the tenth day. I'd spent the two previous days sitting up, trying to balance on my own, with a pelvis not only riven through with cracks and bullet holes but the loss of weight eating away the muscles and fat of my butt and thighs. One of the nurses had described my condition as 'having no real substance' below me.

My young doctor visited twice a day and the surgeon once daily while making rounds with the other doctors. I quit the morphine on the first day I was allowed to walk, with assistance, very proud of myself after the nurse came with a syringe and I sent her back. My stopping the drug wasn't all about courage though, as I lived in fear that the cold-blooded young doctor would return me to detox with the prisoners, who would no doubt be different than the rather kindly ones I'd been in the ward with before. I knew that I had no fear of such men or living in difficult circumstances among them, even men with violent criminal careers. That kind of fear of my fellow men had been driven so deep down in my psychology that I couldn't tell it was there anymore. I did, however, have a bit of marginal fear that I wouldn't have the equipment I needed in order to deal with such men if any situation grew too dangerous for normal communications or common human interaction. Equipment to handle trouble was the most important thing, I'd learned, followed very closely by the ability of the possessor to use such equipment.

I wanted to get back on medical leave as quickly as I could, so I dragged my I.V. stalk and catheter bag through the halls with me, trying to gain strength by walking as far and for as long as I could. The shower shoes the hospital issued me were so cheap that they became my biggest obstacle. I longed for real 'go-aheads,' like I'd been accustomed to when living out on Oahu when I was much younger. I was slowly losing weight again, which was a bifurcated indicator, in that I was weakened in my efforts to grow stronger through exercise, but helping me in that the doctors would be more motivated to let me go in order to build my weight and strength back up.

The analysis of that data worked the last time.

The day of reckoning came in the middle of my third week following the surgery. Everything had gone according to plan, except I was down to the weight level I'd been discharged last time for having. I took the initiative by having the nurses get hold of Johansson. It took him almost two hours to show up. I was so certain that I was going home again that I greeted him with smiling enthusiasm. My I.V. had been pulled the previous day, the catheter bag with it. All my digestive functions were normal. I was ready. My family was waiting for me, and the race preparations had to be in an advanced stage on the GTO. I was excited to not only be able to attend the race without a bag hanging from my belly but also to be a part of getting the car ready.

"You don't have any more medical leave available," Johansson said, as if that information shouldn't make much difference to me.

"What?" I literally hissed at the man, coming out of my bed like a big King Cobra getting ready to strike. "What in hell are you talking about?" I asked, trying to control myself.

"You get two weeks of medical leave a year, and that's it," the lieutenant said, slowly backing away as if he was in front of something more distasteful than dangerous.

"You used all your leave to stay in Fort Sill because of your daughter's birth before you went over.

"So, what in hell am I supposed to do, stay here and wander the halls day and night until I die of starvation?" I asked, controlling the volume and tone of my voice as best I could.

Johansson was all I had when it came to being in contact with the Marine Corps, and the Marine Corps was very definitely the organization I would eventually have to deal with, and spend more time in.

"No, that's not it," the lieutenant replied. "You go back to work. In fact," he went on, pulling out a sheaf of papers from the thin leather notebook he always carried, "I have your orders right here, once you're approved for duty by your surgeon."

I leaned back to gain some support from the edge of the bed. I waited, a bit in wonder and shock, only starting to realize that my experience with the

Corps was so limited I had almost no idea how it all really worked as a military force.

“Treasure Island,” Johannson read from the paper grasped in his left hand. “You’re going to be assigned to Treasure Island as the Adjudications Officer in Charge of U.S. Marine Personnel Transport Goods and Material.”

“What?” was all I could get out.

“Adjudicate,” Johannson said, putting the paper back into a pocket in the folder. “It’s not a common word. Anyone would have a hard time understanding, so don’t feel bad. The word means, basically, ‘decider.’ You’ll decide what stuff is lost, stolen, and all that during moves by personnel between duty stations, and then put a value, if there’s to be a value, on such things so the Marines who’ve lost stuff can get paid for what’s been lost...if it’s been lost. There, that’s it. A desk job so your PULHES designation will be covered.”

I knew I was in shock then, as my body and head rocked slowly back and forth, and I wished I’d never given up the morphine shots.

“PULHES?” I got out, my tone having gone from suppressed anger and disbelief down into depressive resignation.

“Physical, Upper extremities, Lower extremities, Hearing, Eyes and Psychology,” Johannson intoned, interpreting the acronym in a way that made it seem like everyone should know what the letters meant.

“You get rated one, for good, down to a four, for bad in each area,” the lieutenant said, using the

fingers on his left hand to mark off the numbers one through four. "If you average three or worse then you get IDS, which stands for 'denial of service.'

"What am I?" I asked, afraid to hear anymore.

"Oh, that's easy," the lieutenant smiled. "You're a four."

I stood up straighter, hope returning. "So, I'm to be processed out?"

"Nope, not yet anyway," Johannson answered.

"You can't be processed out until there's a hearing, and you can't have a hearing until you get to a permanent duty station and position."

"What's Treasure Island, and that duty station, then?" I asked, trying to figure it all out.

"Temporary duty," the lieutenant intoned, easing toward the door to my room. "It'll be sort of like being on medical leave but having to show up and do stuff...and report to Colonel Armand 'Lightning Bolt' Trainer, I mean."

"I'll have to show up every day in uniform to do whatever adjudication involves?" I asked, not quite being able to picture this new turn of events inside my mind.

Colonel 'Lightning Bolt' Trainer, sounded an awful lot like the man himself if he went by or allowed such a nickname. He was likely nothing more or less than a macho pail of crap.

"So, I'm not going home?" I asked, making the question more of a disappointed statement than a question.

“In a way,” the lieutenant replied. “You’ll be reporting to Treasure Island every weekday at zero seven hundred, work the day, and then go home at four. Regular Marine Corps hours.” Johansson smiled, as if I should be quite happy to hear this new development.

“I’m discharged back to duty, just like that?” I asked, my mind whirling in wonder.

I was still bleeding up and down my torso from the main incision. I would have to carry and change the four-by-four bandages by myself. I thanked God that the new adhesive tape that had just been invented was not like the old. It held the bandages in place but was very easy to remove. It didn’t pull pieces of skin on either side of the incision apart. I could do it. At least I would be home at night and on weekends, and I was going to be out in time to make it over to Half Moon Bay and the drag races.

“When do I come back?” I asked, still not quite believing that I was being discharged back to duty, no matter how limited by some chart calculation.

“You don’t,” Johansson replied, closing my file. ‘You’ll be able to check in at your next full duty station if you have any lingering problems, until the board meets to consider your continuance in the Corps, of course.’

“If I have any lingering issues,” I whispered to myself.

Johansson held out an envelope, he’d kept from the file before he closed it.

“Your new orders,” he intoned, another smile crossing his face.

With that the lieutenant got up, placed my file under his left arm, and held out his right hand. ‘

“A great pleasure to meet you, Junior,” he said.

I stood there, staring into his merriment-filled eyes. This was all funny to him, and no doubt interesting compared to the normal duties he had to conduct. I was being given the bum’s rush, just like I’d been locked up with the brig rats. What could I say or do? They’d also saved my life.

I shook his hand, no expression on my facial feature at all. It was the best I could do. I was hurt again, and I just wanted to get away. I wanted to hurt back but that thought was fleeting, as I walked away from what had been my bed and out into the hall. I walked slowly toward the elevators, realizing that, unless circumstance turned terribly in the wrong direction, that I would not have to return to Oak Knoll, and I began to relax. Wherever I was going was better than where I was coming from. I remembered thinking the same thing when I was pulled out of the A Shau, then out of Japan, and now out of Oak Knoll. When would I arrive at a place that I had any chance of staying in while also staying sane?

I called my wife from the nurse’s station down in the emergency room using the special phone, and supposedly confidential numbers of 91 to access an outside number that allowed for long distance calls. I’d memorized the numbers from my close observation of the doctors when they were nearby.



Daily City, located only a few miles across the bridge into the outskirts of San Francisco proper, was still a long-distance call, and therefore prohibited to patients or visitors.

My wife answered on the second ring, having an idea that I might call but not certain, as, until the liaison officer talked to me we had no idea what was going on. Pat was home, for whatever reason, on a weekday so the three of them would pick me up.

I went back up the elevator to get my shaving gear and other small stuff I had kept following the surgery. I was in mild pain but could move, walk and do everything necessary to be on my own, except I couldn't stand up straight or walk without limping. I was hunched like an old man and moved back down the hall like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. But I didn't care, as long as I could navigate and do so without the colostomy bag.

Pat drove, while Mary sat in the front seat next to her holding Julie. I rested in the back seat. I'd wanted to walk toward the Oakland base of the Bay Bridge and have them pick me up on the way, but that idea wasn't approved at all. Once on the bridge, I asked Pat to pull off into the Treasure Island complex. I pulled out my orders, only to discover that the address was the lighthouse on Yerba Buena Island, the main island that Treasure Island had been artificially constructed from. It took three stops until we could finally get someone to direct us to the lighthouse. Once there we were all stunned. The old lighthouse sat upraised at the very tip of the island,

looking out over the waters of the bay toward San Francisco itself. It was beautiful, although I realized right away that the parking lot for the place was a good quarter of a mile walk from the lighthouse itself. I could do it. I breathed in and out deeply. Maybe my fortune was changing for the better. How bad could the “Lightning Bolt” really be?

“Stop at M&M” I instructed.

I just had to know how the car was doing in preparation for the big race the following week. Julie gurgled gently as we made our way along, Mary and Pat talking about the GTO as if it was more a thing of my imagination rather than being real. I started to nod off, truly relaxing for the first time since the last surgery, my head against the window and corner of the back seat. Pat’s Firebird was brand new and I loved the smell. I smiled to myself. Only a woman would buy a car named Firebird, and then make sure to get the car with the lowest powered six-cylinder engine that General Motors made.

## Chapter XVI

Getting a full Marine Corps Class-A green uniform together took more work than I expected. My report date was for the next day, as there were no free or lull days in Marine Corps life. I had been determined to be available for duty and ordered to my duty station. Whether I was somehow entitled to more recuperation time, I did not, and could not figure out how to know. That was it. The PUHLES report was to be 'appended' to my orders as available, whatever that meant. For the time being, no matter what the state of my wounds or recovery, I was deemed fit for full, albeit temporary, duty.

My uniform, which had been nearly too tight prior to my leaving for the Nam, was now too loose, and there were no tailors either available to work on such a specialized outfit or the money to pay for the needed adjustments. My wife and I decided that bandage packing was the only way I could pass even the most cursory of inspections, and there was little doubt, from Trainer's nickname, that I would have to go through such an inspection.

The uniform worked, as my wife buttoned me in. Actually, the coat, or blouse, as it's called in the Marines, held me all together better than any other piece of clothing I owned, although it did nothing to straighten me out. I was still bent about ten degrees forward at the waist; the hunchback Marine.

Getting up at six a.m. the next morning was no problem at all, as Julie gurgled away, having used the bars to lever herself up to a standing position in order to get our attention. With her crib right next to the bed it was impossible to ignore even the softest of noises radiating out from it. Mary could drive me in Pat's car since she wasn't due at work until nine. We left before the traffic started for the day and she would be leaving after it was over.

The drive was uneventful, but the hard steady wind coming off the bay was cold when I got out of the car on the island. Mary departed right away, hoping to beat the rising traffic just in case, even at the early hour we were up and moving. I took it easy, as I walked carefully down the long gravel path from the parking lot to the lighthouse itself. The bottom portion of the building had been turned into small offices when the light part of the lighthouse itself was turned into a robotically operated machine. There was only one white door set into the back of the gray building. A very small sign said simply "Marines" above the painted-over window located just below it.

I checked my cheap Timex watch, a pang of loss going through me in recalling the wonderful Omega Speedmaster I'd lost when I'd been pulled out of the A Shau Valley. I was right on time. I turned the door handle and then entered the office. I saw immediately that the medium-sized room was occupied by three desks behind a long counter. Two enlisted men sat at two of the desks. One was a corporal and one a three-striper buck sergeant.

“Good morning, sergeant,” I said.

“Good morning, sir, the C.O. is waiting for you,” he replied, pointing at the single closed door on the far wall behind him.

I stood for a few seconds without moving. The sergeant had not gotten to his feet or called the corporal to attention, which was standard operating orders for Marines when in buildings, offices, or any covered area. Both Marines, instead, went immediately back to work on whatever they were working on. I took this failure as a bad sign of what I might expect when I got through the far door.

I walked around the corner of the counter, approached the door, folded my piss cutter cover into my belt, and then knocked.

“Enter,” I heard through the door; a man’s voice, deep and gravelly.

I opened the door, stepped in, and was shocked. A huge picture window was located just behind Lightning Bolt’s chair. The view was astounding. Water was lapping onto something out of view below, the city across the bay occupied the left two-thirds of the window while one of the towering legs of the bridge filled up the rest. It was a stunning scene.

“You’re on temporary duty from Oak Knoll, it says here,” the Colonel said. “Uniform here, by the way, is not Class ‘A.’ It’s Class ‘C’ like you see the rest of us wearing.”

“I see, sir,” I blurted out, not thinking.

“If you think that’s funny, it’s not,” the Colonel shot right back. “Your job is to occupy that empty

desk out there. As the Marine Corps Adjudication Officer, it's up to you to approve or disapprove of travel loss claims. The sergeant and corporal are the investigators of the claims. Hours are seven a.m. until four, with an hour for lunch. We run on Vince Lombardi time so that means you'll be here fifteen minutes early every day, is that clear? That also means you're late."

I'd gone to St. Norbert College in West DePere, Wisconsin, where the Green Bay Packers did their spring training. I'd served as the breakfast cook for the Packer team every morning while they were in training, including Mr. Lombardi himself. I knew instantly, however, that there was no point telling the colonel any of that. This was my first command, outside of what time I'd spent in the valley where there was no real command, and it was already evident that it was not going to go well.

"Yes, sir," I replied, as crisply as I could.

"You walk like a lobster because of the medical stuff, I know," the Colonel said before I could turn to leave. "You've also got a drug problem. If I get one whiff of that or see any evidence at all then your ass will be court-martialed faster than you can say the words drug addict."

I stared at the man, noting the ribbons pinned to the left side of his shirt. The man had to have served almost twenty years in the Corps, to be his age, and to be a Colonel, yet even though he'd been a Marine through Korea and now the Vietnam war he only had six ribbons, the top one being a Navy Achievement

Award. My green blouse had ten ribbons on it. I'd been a Marine for little more than a year, and my own Navy Achievement ribbon was the fifth one down, in order of importance.

Going out through the door I couldn't think about anything much except that I was about to sit at a desk and try to do something that I had no idea how to do, but first I had to get to the bathroom and change my four-by-four bandages before the blood could leak through my shirt. It was uncomfortable to feel the familiar wetness, but at least there was no pain. I'd been able to fit sixteen folded bandages into my back pockets, thanking God that my smaller frame made for plenty of room.

I walked over to the buck sergeant, not expecting much.

"Where's the restroom, sergeant?" I asked.

"In the corner behind your desk, sir," he replied, his voice normal, but then he continued on in a near whisper, "The wall between the bathroom and his office is thin so he'll be able to hear you if you have to puke."

The sergeant went back to work like he hadn't said something pretty strange. I thought about what he'd said on my way into the small bathroom and then got it with a smile. The sergeant was telling me that both he and the corporal knew exactly what they were working with and that my being introduced to Lightning Bolt had to be a shock to my system. It was a shock, but not one that truly rocked my world. The A Shau had rocked my world. Surviving the surgeries

and getting home from Japan had shocked my world. The Colonel was simply another difficult Marine waiting to go out on point or fall into the muck from damage suffered by a booby trap or 'enemy' fire.

I went to work on replacing the bandages, only to discover that I had a problem. I could unbutton the blouse, but I could not button it back up. The material and the buttons were so tough that neither would suffer damage from my trying, but my fingers just weren't strong enough. The shirt was already stained so I couldn't go out carrying the blouse under one arm.

Cracking the bathroom door open, I knocked on the wood to get the sergeant's attention. I didn't know how thin the walls were, but I didn't need 'Lightning Bolt' hearing anything. The sergeant looked up and I waved my hand to call him to me.

The sergeant got up and came to the door. I opened it fully.

"Holy shit," the sergeant said, coming in and then taking a look at me. He quickly closed the door behind him. "What in the hell happened to you?"

He asked the words as he glanced down into the unflushed toilet bowl, which was filled with bandages and blood. The scene in the bowl made things look worse than they really were, I knew and I wished that I'd flushed the thing before calling him in.

"Vietnam," I replied, not knowing why I had to, but then went on. "Discharged from Oak Knoll to duty until I can get a permanent station and a medical board."



“Those assholes discharged you in this kind of shape, sir?” The sergeant asked.

I couldn’t think of a reasonable answer to the question, other than the obvious one. Yes, they had, but what was the point in continuing that line of discussion or thought? I changed the subject.

“I can’t get buttoned back in,” I said, clutching the front vertical edges of the coat together as far as I could. “My wife took care of the buttons at home, so I could use a bit of help. No coat anymore though as Colonel ‘Bolt’ indicates that we all wear Class “C” uniforms.”

The sergeant went down on his right knee and started to work on the buttons, one at a time, from the top down. I noted that he didn’t wear a nametag. I had inadvertently left my own at home on the top of the dresser. It was going to take some time to get my mind back into the kind of analytical precision it took to appear in public as a Marine Officer in full uniform.

“What’s your name, and why no name tag?” I asked.

“Name’s Church, sir, and the corporal is Pugh, pronounced like pew, as in church, and the Colonel’s discretion has us not wearing name tags, not standing for officers other than him, and not saluting one another when covered, unless other military personnel are in the area.”

“Church pew?” I whispered out, wondering if the sergeant was kidding me.

“The colonel doesn’t think that’s funny, and neither does the corporal, sir” Sergeant Church said,

finishing the buttoning job and returning to a standing position before me.

"I think it's funny as hell," I said, unable to hold back a smile.

"Me too, although he's so quiet I almost wish his last name was Mouse."

At that, the sergeant turned, opened the door, and went back into the office area. I finished getting my belt buckled, my cover replaced, my tie straightened and my back pockets fluffed out as much as I could fluff them. The bandages had been perfect for filling me out but I wasn't going to replace their mass with toilet paper, the only available alternative, so I flushed the toilet and turned to the door.

I went out to my desk, noting that a high pile of files sat next to the wooden swivel chair bellied up to it. I pulled the chair out and sat down. The sergeant got up and came to my desk, leaning forward and picking off the top file from the stack.

"Here's the gig, sir," he said, opening the file. "The top page is the summation and result of the investigation that the corporal and I have done to determine the merits of the case and compensation that should be paid if any. Your job is fairly simple. Review the file and decide whether the claim should be denied, modified or approved for payment. Initial and sign under one of the three alternatives and then stamp the file with your special Marine Adjudication Officer Stamp that's in the center drawer.

That's it. As you can see, we haven't had an officer here for some time. The last one only made it three days."

The sergeant handed me the file. I took it, turned it around, and immediately came up with about ten questions I'd like to ask, particularly the first one which would have been about why the prior officer left in such short order, although my suspicion immediately went back to my introduction to the Lightning Bolt. I asked nothing, however, merely nodding and thanking the sergeant instead. I had to get my feet on the ground and find out as much as I could before revealing that I knew nothing about the job that I was supposed to do. The corporal and the sergeant both probably knew I didn't know a damned thing, but I wasn't ready to admit anything.

I went through the file. It was half an inch thick, like the others in the big stack of backed-up claims. It took almost three hours to take in the whole mess of what was supposedly lost, what the moving companies claimed wasn't lost at all, the damaged goods, the appraisals, and then the investigative procedures and interviews the corporal and the sergeant had conducted. I closed the file and looked at the stack with some weary skepticism. There were at least a hundred hours of work to be done just to catch up. Eight hours a day, divided into the hundred meant that I would have to work straight for thirteen days. But it wasn't that simple. There were also rules to check. The investigation did not cite such things as if the military would ship personal weapons, or what

kind of weapons they would if they did. The first claim was partially for stolen rifles that had been packed inside rolled-up rugs, for whatever reasons.

“Mysterious disappearance” was the term the corporal had used instead of suspected theft. I liked the mysterious disappearance touch, given that the claimant was also a full bird colonel and who knows what position he held, or where, in the Corps.

It was an awful job, but I knew I’d have to dig in and somehow do it. My body hurt from the vertical position that I tried to attempt to remain in order to read. I hadn’t read anything for three hours straight since I’d left for the Nam, seemingly so long ago. I wasn’t up to doing the job for five hours and then three more after lunch. Not every day and, in fact, I knew, not even for one full day.

I decided to call Johannson. I had to know more about the PHULES thing in order to see what I could do in order to perform my job with any kind of effectiveness. I couldn’t work straight through and I knew that Lightning Bolt wasn’t going to give me one bit of slack.

The phone for the lieutenant rang but nobody answered. I decided that I had to go outside and move a bit, even if it was just to walk a short way over to the water’s edge and take in some fresh air. The cold air of the morning was gone when I got outside. I’d said nothing to the sergeant about leaving and they’d ignored my departure.

I sat on some big rocks set right near the lapping water’s edge and enjoyed the view, the wind, the

sound of the wind, and even the faint noise of the vehicles crossing the raised but nearby bridge highway. The experience both re-energized me and restored some of the hope that had seemed to seep from my mind while the blood seeped from the central incision.

My steps back to the office were careful and measured. The last thing I needed was to fall and either add any more injuries to my tattered body or cause more bleeding than my now non-existent supply of bandages could lap up.

When I walked in through the door the corporal stood and held out his phone.

“For you, sir,” he said, as I went around the counter and retrieved his handset.

“How’s Treasure Island?” Johansson asked before I could do more than acknowledge my presence.

“I’m not on Treasure Island,” I replied. “I’m on the main island.”

“Yeah, the one nobody can remember so everyone calls the whole thing Treasure Island,” he said.

I wondered what was so difficult about Yerba Buena but ignored answering the strange comment.

“Exactly what do I not have to do,” I asked him directly and pointedly, “No matter if ordered or not, in order to not be court-martialed at my level of disability?” I asked, making no effort to hide what I was saying from either the corporal or the sergeant.

“Well, I guess things aren’t going so well,” Johansson intelligently responded. “You pretty much can make your own rules about hours, what you can or can’t do physically and also can take breaks, show up late or leave early. Hope that helps.”

“What if ‘Lightening Dick’ doesn’t agree?” I asked. “Can I be court-martialed for any of that?”

“Nope, but he can write a letter to your 201 File that’ll follow you to your permanent duty station, I mean, once you have one.”

I thought for a minute without saying anything.

“Anything else he might do?” I asked.

“He can recommend where your permanent duty station is going to be,” Johansson said.

I laughed lightly. Like I cared. There were no permanent duty stations I could think of that didn’t allow for my family to be posted with me.

“My pay hasn’t caught up with me yet, and I’m tired of depending on my wife’s roommate to survive,” I said. “Find my pay and find promotion. I have to become a First Lieutenant one day soon as all the other guys from my Basic Class have gotten their promotions.”

I hung up without saying goodbye or thanking the lieutenant. He’d basically done nothing for me, so far. From his tone and his understanding of my situation I knew he’d known when he’d sent me to Treasure Island what I was in for, and he hadn’t bothered to warn me or, in any way I could figure, keep me from walking into the nightmare mess that the adjudication officer billet really was.

I handed the phone to the corporal, who'd returned to sitting at his desk. Suddenly, both he and the sergeant sprung to their feet and assumed the position of attention.

I realized that the colonel's door was open.

"Lieutenant, my office, now," Lightning Bolt said, his voice raised and hard before slamming the door shut.

"Did I speak too loudly?" I whispered over to Sergeant Church.

"Four party line," the sergeant replied, pointing at his own phone, his tone rueful. "He was probably listening to the whole thing."

I looked at the closed door and then prepared myself, as best I could before walking the short distance and opening it. I didn't close the door behind me, but simply walked to the colonel's desk and stood as straight as I could, staring, unblinking, through the window behind his head.

"You little pissant," the colonel hissed across the desk. "You think you can disrespect me in my own command? Do you think your battle wounds and ribbons mean jack to me? You and I are not going to get on here."

After the three initial hissed words, the remainder of the colonel's delivery was made at an ever-growing volume until 'here' had come out as a shout.

"We are not getting on here, colonel," I observed calmly, still staring out the window.

"Look at me when you're talking to me," Lightning Bolt yelled.

I dropped my gaze to stare into the man's angry eyes.

"You'll do exactly as I tell you from here on out with no comment or complaint, do you understand me?" The colonel's eyes were not filled with anger, they were brimming with hate.

"I am a 4 on the PHULES chart, colonel, which you have a copy of with my orders. I will follow the Marine Corp regulations with respect to those things I can and cannot do, will and will not do, and you can court-martial me all you want."

I said the words soft and low, just as I'd learned. The verbal delivery of a true predator among mankind never threatens and never yells. A true predator merely prepares and then acts. I could not stop the thoughts from cascading through my mind about what actions I might or must have to take, to eliminate any threat Lightning Bolt was rapidly turning into.

"Ha!" the colonel said, an evil grin crossing his visage.

"You've forgotten one thing, my inexperienced friend," he went on. "No matter what the PHULES chart and instructions are, you must still perform the mission you were assigned and I'm now putting you on notice that you have fifteen days to complete all the work on those backed-up files or you will indeed be court-martialed for failure to obey a lawful order, and quite likely the corporal and sergeant along with you."

At that, the colonel looked away, crossed his arms, and spun his chair around so he could stare out



the window. I presumed the interview was over, so I turned and left the office. When I walked through the door, quietly closing it behind me, both the corporal and the sergeant were twisted around and staring at me in shock. I knew their look of near terror had nothing to do with what had happened between me and Lighting Bolt. It had to do with their being included in my situation and the potential that they could face the loss of their careers along with me.

"Is there a Marine contingent over on the island at the Naval base?" I asked.

"Of course, sir, the Marine Barracks," the sergeant replied, his brow fully furrowed in question. "The guard contingent for the Naval base is pretty large, given the nuclear stuff going on."

"Nuclear stuff?" I asked, surprised.

"Don't go anywhere near the fake ship called the Pandemonium," Corporal Pugh said. "Everyone having anything to do with that ship gets sick."

"Fake ship?" I asked, beginning to feel pretty stupid.

I had no idea what either Marine was talking about. All I knew about the real Treasure Island Naval Base is that the four-hundred- and three-acre island had been artificially constructed to hold the 1939 World's Fair, and after that, a few years later, the entire assembly was taken down and junked.

I was headed for the base, but there was no point in telling the corporal or sergeant that. If they were in fear of losing their place or career in the Corps then they could, at any moment, turn and side

with the colonel. I saw it as the likely smartest move for both of them, as I was a second lieutenant and, therefore, as far as officers went, a nobody.

“You need a ride over there?” the sergeant asked, going right to the heart of what I’d just thought about when it came to going anywhere.

“That would be great sergeant, but what about leaving your duty station?” I replied.

“Lunch break,” he replied. “But, I’m not very hungry anymore.”

## Chapter XVII

I walked outside the office and onto the gravel trail leading up to the parking lot I'd come down from earlier in the day. I heard a motorcycle start up behind me. I stopped and turned. The motorcycle drove slowly up to me on the gravel. I stepped off to one side. Then I saw it was the sergeant driving the cycle. I let out a sigh. It had never occurred to me that the sergeant would have anything other than a car.

"Want a lift?" he said, as the machine under the sergeant purred away.

"Honda 305 Dream," the sergeant said, pulling his goggles up. "Hop on, or crawl on, in your case. Every day I can pick you up in the parking lot, drive you down to the office, and then back when you're ready to go."

I crawled onto the sleek black machine. I didn't comment on the fact that neither my wife nor I had our car back running, and the cars we borrowed were not always available to borrow. Even if everything worked out perfectly, I would owe Sears and Roebuck for the rest of my life, not just for the loan of the money but for helping my family survive in its worst time. Mickey Thompson was another case entirely. He never ever discussed my owing anything, loaned me his car, and even tossed me a few dollars when I did something extra to earn it.

The bike handled the gravel like it was built for it until we got onto the asphalt. I'd had a Triumph

motorcycle when I was a sophomore in college, but the Dream was a wonder compared to that hacking, it'll start someday and run like a lump of coal rolling down the road kind of thing in comparison. After three accidents in six months and a Bell helmet cracked right down the center, I swore to my girlfriend, and soon-to-be future wife, that I'd never ride a motorcycle again, but here I was. I was relieved to ride it, however, as the walk down to the office had been taxing and the walk back up would have been even tougher.

The gate was in the center of the road, once you got under the main thoroughfare of the bridge traffic passing overhead. A building sat to the left side of the road, while giant palms ran, seemingly forever, from the building further into the base. There was no traffic. Church stopped the bike as a Marine PFC held up one white-gloved hand.

"You don't have a base sticker?" I whispered into the sergeant's right ear.

"Hundred percent I.D. on this base," the sergeant replied, pulling his wallet from his left rear pocket.

I did the same. I was reminded of the nuclear comment. Almost all military bases required identification stickers, but not this one. Evidently, they cared a whole lot less about auto or cycle insurance, registration, and any of that much less than they did about military identity.

The Marine leaned over and peered down at my I.D. card, then snapped to attention and did a perfect hand salute. I hadn't put my piss cutter cover on for

the motorcycle ride, so I couldn't salute back. I merely nodded, and then put away my identification.

The sergeant pulled the 305 from the guard checkpoint at a very slow speed. Military bases around the country were almost zero tolerant when it came to speeding around on the base, given that the services are filled with so many young people that are a bit impulsive and expressive. I peered out past Church's left shoulder. The road ahead, lined with the giant palms on its left side, ran the length of the base in a straight line. I made no attempt to say anything to the sergeant, as he knew where I was going and, obviously, how to get there. There were no traffic control devices on the main road or at least none that we encountered. About halfway down, without warning, Church leaned the bike to the right and entered a street marked with an "H" painted atop what looked like a grounded and dug into one-by-six wooden board. In front of what was obviously the administration building the sergeant made a U-turn and pulled the bike up to a row of white-painted rocks that served as a curb in front of the place. He turned the bike off but didn't get off. I crawled off from behind him.

"You got about twenty minutes, sir," Sergeant Church said, lighting up a cigarette he'd tapped out of a red and white Marlboro pack. "Twenty minutes gives me about half an hour to get to your place in Daly City and back, long as you don't mind a little bobbing and weaving through the traffic."

"I didn't call my wife," I began, trying to explain that I hadn't called her for a ride, not that she probably couldn't come for me even if I'd reached her, not in mid-day, and not with the vagaries of Mickey's 442 availability or the needs of a less than one-year-old child because Mary was alone with Julie. Pat worked until five.

"Half an hour, sir," the sergeant said, blowing a puff of smoke into the warm windy air.

Somehow, the sergeant had been able to guess that my life was being held together with threads, his having to help me in the bathroom no doubt contributing to his conclusion. Why could I not get along with other officers almost not at all but enlisted NCOs were almost, one and all, wonderful to me?

I checked my Timex and made for the stairs leading up to the double door entrance to the place. Once inside I stopped and pressed my back into the closed-door I'd just come through, trying to get rid of the ache running up and down my torso and trying to straighten my shoulders back, but it was no use. Neither the ache nor my shoulders were in a cooperating mood.

I noted immediately that the barracks was commanded by a major, which made sense since I thought the commander of the entire base was probably only a Navy captain. The captain would outrank the major. Next to a black and white picture of the major was an imposing shot of a man who looked more like a 'real Marine' than anyone I'd seen in some time. Hard eyes, a bit aged, lantern jaw. His rank was

sergeant major. I held my cover in my right hand, having had to wear it once I got off the bike for the walk up to the office entrance. I didn't want to replace it in my belt in case my blouse leaked through. Wearing a stained coat was one thing, but a stained cover would never be overlooked.

I approached the commanding officer's door but entered without knocking. Through the glass windows, I could see a counter and people working behind that counter. The commander's actual office had to be smaller and probably behind the working area I witnessed. I stepped up to the counter. A woman noticed me and walked over.

"What can I do for you lieutenant?" she asked, with a smile.

"I need to see the commanding officer," I said.

"Maneuvers," the woman replied. "Won't be back for two weeks. Somewhere called Twenty-Nine Palms down south. Sounds delightful. I wonder if there really are twenty-nine palms there."

No commanding officer. I thought for a few seconds.

"The sergeant major in?" I asked, hoping she'd say he wasn't.

"Want me to announce you?" the woman asked. "But then, you're an officer and outrank him so you don't have to be announced. His office is against the wall over there," she pointed behind her, "His title's on it. The door's closed but that shouldn't matter to you."

I noted that the two other women, both civilians, like the woman in front of me, had stopped working to

look up. I didn't take that as a good sign. They were eager for me to go over and disturb the sergeant major, no matter what he might be doing in his office. The man's appearance in the photograph had probably perfectly captured his attitude and comportment.

"Announce me," I said.

The woman's smile got larger. "Got it, did you?" she replied.

She stepped away and headed for the sergeant major's door. She knocked three times but said nothing.

The door opened almost immediately. I could not hear what was said, but the sergeant major towered over the woman by almost a foot, and the woman hadn't been that much shorter than I was, especially in my hunched-over condition.

The sergeant major disappeared. The woman walked back to stand in front of me again.

"The sergeant major will see you," she said, then whispered, "like he has any choice."

I got the distinct feeling that the woman had no use for the sergeant major but I said nothing, merely following her after she raised a hinged panel on the counter and let me through.

The woman opened the door in front of me and then closed it when I stepped through. I felt like she'd guided me into a lion's den at the zoo. I almost wanted to check the door behind me to see if it automatically locked, but I didn't.



The sergeant-major came quickly to his feet and stood at attention behind his desk, surprising me.

"I'm the new adjudication officer over at the lighthouse," I said, forgetting to give him my name or rank.

"What can I do for you, sir," the sergeant major replied, staring straight ahead, right through me.

"Stand at ease, or sit at ease," I replied, looking over at the only other chair in the room, up against the wall.

I made for the chair, pulling it out and then placing it directly in front of the sergeant major's desk before sitting down.

"I need your advice," I breathed out, not wanting to say the words but I had absolutely no place else to go.

"That's a new one, sir," the sergeant major laughed out. "A junior officer needs my enlisted advice." He said the last sentence with no humor in his voice at all.

"Yes," I said. "I'm in trouble and don't know what to do."

I noted the sergeant major's decorations for the first time. His chest looked like my own, rows of ribbons, with both the Korean and Vietnam campaign ribbons. He had a purple heart. A tendril of hope rose up inside me.

"Marine Sergeant Major to Marine Lieutenant, or man to man, sir?" he asked.

There was no beating around the bush with this Marine, I realized. Either I was to take a risk and trust

him or simply make an uncomfortable situation even worse.

"Where'd you get hit?" he suddenly asked me, not waiting for my response to his previous question.

"Three in the torso," I replied, knowing the obviously weathered and bright man had to have seen my ribbons and noted my physical presentation.

"No, that's kind of obvious," the sergeant major replied. "I meant, where in-country were you hit?"

"A Shau Valley," I replied, wondering if that horrid crease in the earth, thousands of miles away, would ever dim in my consciousness. I already knew it would never leave.

"Rock Pile," the sergeant major said, his conclusive tone seeming to indicate that there was no more to be discussed. The Rock Pile in South Vietnam was located close to Khe Sanh, only a few thousand meters from the A Shau, toward the sea, and like down in the valley, a lot of Marines had died there.

"What is it?" the sergeant major asked.

I started with my release from Oak Knoll but very quickly went into the nightmare I was just beginning to experience with Lightning Bolt. I detailed just about everything I could remember of the dialogue between the colonel and myself. I looked at my watch. I had fifteen minutes to get any help I might get before I had to get back to the sergeant or forego a ride home.

"I pulled a bit of a better billet, that's for damn sure," the sergeant major said, once I was done. "The major almost never shows up and then almost never

talks when he does show up. The Officers Club over on Yerba in the tower is Lightning's hangout, and I support him hanging out there all I can."

I waited, trying not to show my impatience. The sergeant-major was running on about himself while I sat miserably in front of him. I wondered if he was prolonging my agony in order to do the sometimes obnoxious enlisted/officer tap dance, wherein officers were portrayed as effete lazy snobs and the enlisted men as hardworking strong 'real' Marines.

"Okay, here's what you do," the sergeant major said, surprising me once again with his directness and willingness to help.

"You're the Marine Corps Adjudication Officer for this region or zone, or however they break the world apart for that sort of thing. Your commanding officer is not the adjudication officer. He's your commanding officer, which means he has nothing to do with the decisions you make or any of the rest of it when it comes to the adjudication part. His job is making sure you are there and do the work."

"Yes?" I asked after he'd stopped talking for almost half a minute and did not go on.

"You're going to go in tomorrow, sign, and then stamp every one of those cases and files as approved. You get up and leave. Call Lightning the next day and tell him to call you when more claims come in."

"My God," was all I could get out. The audacity of the plan was more than shocking. It was stunning. "He'll have me court-martialed for certain on that one."

“He’s screwed,” the sergeant major said. “He’s not the adjudication officer so he can’t change, certify or do a damned thing. If he reports you, then neither can anybody else change your decisions on the cases, not without a nuclear explosion going off that will certainly cost Lightning Bolt his career, if not more.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, a shot of excitement traveling up and down the center of my body, followed by small bolts of fear.

“You won’t have to call or stop by to let me know what happens,” the sergeant major said, a great smile opening up to cross his face. “I should be able to hear the results all the way over on this island.”

At that, he slid a card across the desk toward me. It was the major’s Marine Corps card with the eagle, globe, and anchor in gold on its surface. Major Martin Bullman was crossed out, and the sergeant-major had written his own name under it.

I took the card and smiled, mostly to myself. The sergeant-major was having some of his own problems with his commanding officer but saying nothing about it, other than the hint the card modification gave away.

“I can’t thank you enough sergeant-major,” I said, grasping the card and then standing to leave.

“Quite some ribbons you have on that uniform,” the sergeant major replied, getting to his own feet.

“It wouldn’t seem to me that you were any kind of regular company-grade officer over in the Nam, and you sure as hell don’t give that impression now. Before you leave the islands, we’ll have to have a

drink up in the Officer's Club over on your side. They let me in as a sergeant major, although I'm not sure why."

"Thanks again, sergeant major," I said, standing and extending my left hand

The sergeant took it, gripping my hand more gently than I would have guessed. He held my hand a few seconds longer than was necessary

"They play hardball back here, so, as quickly as you can get yourself a glove," the sergeant major said, letting go of my hand. "Until then remember the Marine Corps motto."

"Motto?" I asked.

"If you can't baffle them with your bullshit then dazzle them with your footwork."

The sergeant-major smiled at me with a twinkle in his eyes. I would be sure to contact him again, no matter what happened, I realized.

I rushed from the sergeant major's office, glancing down at my Timex. I had only two minutes to make it to the bike, although I knew in my heart that the buck sergeant would never desert me. I lifted my head as I limped down the steps, using the railing for support. I had a plan. I hadn't had a plan for anything in some time. The last real plan I'd had in the A Shau had cost a lot of Marines their lives. It was such a release to know that my plans now would not cost lives, not if I could help it.

The motorcycle ride was tougher than I thought it would be. Without goggles, I had to keep my head out of the slipstream, which meant I couldn't see much of

anything or where we were going. Our speed was such that there wasn't any real opportunity to talk either, or I would have had the sergeant drop me off at M&M. The race was important to me for reasons I couldn't explain, even to me. When I was in front of the apartment in Daly City, I turned, once I got myself off the bike with some difficulty and thanked the sergeant.

"See you at zero seven hundred," I said.

"What about Vince Lombardi time?" the sergeant asked, a sly smile crossing his face.

"Screw Vince Lombardi. He's a Green Bay Packer and this is the United States Marine Corps," I replied. "See you at zero seven hundred."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, with a smile and some enthusiasm.

I realized I could not make the walk to M&M. I had to go inside. My bandages were probably soaked through. I also knew that I was wearing my Class "A" uniform with blouse the next day. My orders said Class "A" and that was the order I would follow. If the colonel wanted to court-martial me then I was ready for that. The sergeant-major had not only given me a plan but put some spine back into my attitude and my step.

I went inside, taking my time, assured of nothing but no longer afraid of whatever it was that the Marine Corps could throw at me.

My wife was a wonder, although I avoided telling her anything about how the day had really gone. I was

not going to be swayed by the plan the sergeant major had laid out for me.

I collapsed onto the couch in the living room, but I knew the peace of a quick nap or simply a short period to lie down and recover from the day's events wasn't going to happen. A very small person made her way across the room, sort of crawling, sort of walking, and using every bit of furniture to beeline for the couch. Julie was glad I was home. How could I not respond to that kind of totally accepting and open greeting?

The debate going on inside my mind could not be quieted. I had bandages to change and a uniform to get out of. I only had two khaki long sleeve shirts, and, although the officer shirts required by the Marine Corps were wonderfully made of the best quality materials, how long could the shirts endure the constant leakage of blood?

Mary washed the shirts first in cold milk, which worked every time, but I still wondered. How long would it take for the incision to heal, and what was I to do about wearing the Class "C" short sleeve shirt that was a whole lot thinner and would not hold me together at all?

Mary walked into the room carrying a small thin box.

"Here it is, the solution to the problem," she said, tossing the box over Julie's head, to land on the couch next to me.

It was a box of Saran Wrap, I saw immediately. I recoiled back from it automatically, then looked up at Mary.

“Something wrong?” she asked, reading the expression on my face that I hadn’t been quick enough to hide.

Saran Wrap, the effective tool the North Vietnamese Army had been clever enough to field down in the A Shau Valley. Tightly wrapping their bodies with the thin plastic substance allowed them to charge into the fire of very high velocity, but low mass, M-16 bullets. Instead of the bullets tumbling, like they mostly did when hitting something as water-filled as a human torso, the quarter-inch in diameter bullets would simply race right on through. The soldiers could keep charging. The wrap was the solution to my physical problem, I realized, but the psychological problem of using the wrap in that way made me almost nauseous. The graphic mind photos that appeared before me, of the wrapped bodies penetrated by thousands of flechettes fired by the Ontos, nearly replaced the reality of my wife and daughter standing in front of me.

“Nothing,” I got out, breathing shallow and trying to hide my feelings.

“Let’s get you changed and try this out,” Mary replied, choosing to ignore my rather obvious negative reaction to the plastic wrap.

I would wear it and I’d also drive down the mental demons that had risen up at the sight of the box.



Saran Wrap, had, after all, been invented right after WWII, a long time before the Vietnam war. It'd been invented to cover the wings of exposed aircraft left out in the open for storage, and so it would cover me. I needed to get over to check on the GTO and I needed to be able to be presentable for whatever new command I would probably be very shortly assigned to, either that or the brig.

In the bathroom, I looked at myself in the mirror before I changed. The Sergeant Major had given me two platitudes, but they were platitudes that would help me survive the remaining time I had in the Corps. I'd figure out as quickly as I could what might serve as a 'glove' in the game of the peacetime Marine Corps I'd been thrust back into, and tomorrow I would go to my Yerba Buena Island office and 'dazzle them with my footwork.' I stripped off my shirt, tossed the bandages I eased from my torso, and called through the open door for my wife, as Julie had crawled right along with me to end up sitting on my right foot.

When Mary came in, I handed her the box of Saran Wrap and applied new four-by-fours up and down the outside of my center incision. I extended my arms out from my sides when I was done, and Mary went to work wrapping my torso tightly. The NVA had prepared for combat in exactly that same way I was preparing for it.

They'd gone out and been hit, as I would be on the morrow, but they'd not gone down. I was determined not to go down.

## Chapter XVIII

The trip to Yerba Buena Island wasn't remarkable in any way, except for the fact that I remained entranced with the passing scenes of difference and beauty that the entire San Francisco basin always offered. Pat drove her low-powered Pontiac to the parking lot and I got out, much more comfortable in my Saran-wrapped body than I'd been the day before. Because of the usage of the NVA preparatory wrap I'd given in, and not worn my Class "A" blouse, as I'd planned.

It was a few minutes before 0700. I had not given in on the Colonel's order to be fifteen minutes early.

When I got out of the car in the parking lot, I was surprised to see the sergeant on his Honda Dream, waiting at the entrance to the path.

"Sergeant?" I asked, wondering why he was sitting there, on his quietly running Honda Dream.

Pat and Mary pulled out of the parking lot, no doubt intending to beat the traffic which would swell later, first on all the lanes across the Bay Bridge, then throughout the remainder of the downtown streets of the busy city.

I stood still for a few seconds, to take in the scene, feeling the cool wind off the bay blowing over me. I didn't know what I was waiting for, but part of it was, I knew, that I would not, under any circumstances, arrive at my place of work on 'Lombardi Time,' or one second before I was required

to by the Marine Corps, not some self-bloated Colonel calling himself Lightning Bolt. The myth of Lombardi Time would not be retired. In fact, it would likely never be retired, I knew. But I was not going to let Lightning Bolt use it on me as some sort of servile obedience device. I looked down at my cheap but accurate Timex, to see that it was now exactly seven a.m.

The sergeant eased the Honda Dream up right next to me, the bike gently and quietly idling away.

"Thought you might need a lift," the sergeant said, taking out a pack of cigarettes. He held out the pack to me. I instantly went back to the valley and how I'd smoked there just to make Gunny feel better about my being one with him.

I looked at the small red and white box, one cigarette protruding out of the opening at its top. I wasn't in Vietnam. I wasn't trying to win the Gunny over. I wasn't anywhere near that world. I struggled mentally for a few seconds, before taking the offered cigarette. The sergeant pulled out one for himself, lit it with a Zippo lighter, and then offered the barely flickering flame to me. I inhaled lightly, remembering the Gunny's special Zippo, the Marlboro smoke entering my lungs, seeming like an old irritating friend. The sergeant's Zippo had disappeared quickly once my cigarette was lit so I hadn't had time to see if it was specially engraved.

We smoked half our cigarettes before, in unspoken agreement, crushing them out against the ground and 'field stripping' them before tossing the remnants into the moving air around us.

I climbed onto the back of the idling Dream, clutching the sergeant close. I was no longer afraid of bleeding through my shirt. I'd decided that Lightning Bolt did have the authority to assign the use of the more informal "C" uniform.

The cycle eased on down the path, taking the unstable gravel and small bumps easily, as if the street machine had somehow been designed to handle off-road travel, as well. I girded myself for the coming confrontation, which I knew had to take place. Lightning Bolt might be a mean-spirited curmudgeon but he was an outspoken and aggressive bully when it came to dealing with Marines under his command.

The sergeant pulled his machine up to the side of the building, close to the door, then shut it down and leaned it against the wall. Just as a thought was forming in my head about why he didn't use the kickstand built into the beautiful little machine, he spoke.

"In case we need a quick getaway."

I almost laughed, but then noted that the sergeant's facial expression was quite serious.

I walked through the door. Corporal Pugh jumped to his feet.

"Good morning sir," he said, standing at attention.

"Stand at ease, corporal," I ordered, before stopping in surprise.

"He's not in this morning, sir," the corporal said, slowly lowering himself back onto the seat of a cheap wooden swivel chair, identical to the government

issue ones we all used. "He'll return at 1300 hours from a meeting in San Francisco."

I stood there, not knowing what to think. I was relieved that there would be no immediate confrontation or emotional explosion over my 'tardiness,' or any of the other domineering control attacks the Colonel was likely to make.

"Your orders, sir? the sergeant asked, pulling up next to me at the counter.

"Gentlemen, we have five hours," I replied, not being able to keep a completely straight face while I talked. "Five hours for you to help me approve each and every complaint file, exactly the way it's come recommended, and then one hour to spend at the Officer's Club for lunch.

The Officer's Club on the island allowed an officer to have up to two enlisted guests, by invitation, although they could only be allowed into the restaurant, not the lounge.

All three of us approached my desk. The corporal went around and began to load the piles of files from the stacks nearby onto the top of it. The sergeant began separating and counting the files.

"Two hundred and twenty-seven," he finally said, as he began walking files over to his and the corporal's desks. "God knows how old some of these are," he said, more to himself, rather than to the corporal or me.

"What's the procedure?" I asked, knowing the answer to that question was the most important part of what I was attempting to do.

“It’ll take about a minute a file, to go through the checklists, mark them in the right places with your initials, and then sign and stamp,” the sergeant replied, nodding his head when he finished. “Yes, we can do this.”

The three of us went to work; the corporal selecting a file and recording it, the sergeant opening and isolating, with small tabs, the places that had to be initialed and then signed in two places along with my official identity and rank indications. There was no time to read much of anything that didn’t absolutely have to be read. At top speed, without a break, if the sergeant’s calculation was correct, just going through the process to completion would take a bit under four hours. As I began work, my mind raced. It was the best possible circumstance, I realized, with the Colonel not being in attendance. He would have no clue, until his return, about what was going on, and therefore couldn’t stop the process by using some sleight-of-hand maneuver or clever subterfuge, of which he was fully capable.

The work was complete by 11:05, which meant that there was time enough to get a mailbag together and haul the load of finished files over to the Marine contingent on Treasure Island for immediate shipment to Headquarters Marine Corps Logistics and Disbursement.

When the files were properly broken down and stacked, corporal Pugh prepared to pack them into large leather reinforced shipping bags.

“How do we get them over to S-4 Logistics?” I asked. “Each bag weighs about fifty pounds and we don’t have time to make four runs on the Dream.”

“The Colonel’s jeep, sir,” Corporal Pugh replied.

The sergeant and I both looked at the Marine as if he’d lost his mind.

“It’s Marine Corps business, sir, and that’s what the jeep’s for, even if Lightning uses it for everything else,” Pugh said as if he was making total sense.

I smiled and then so did the sergeant. It was perfect. The Colonel was going to be cut down using his very own equipment.

“Let’s go,” I said, moving to the door, opening it, and looking up toward the parking lot. The very last thing we needed was for the Colonel to come back early from his meeting.

The corporal went through the door I held open at a lope, disappearing around the right rear corner of the old lighthouse building. In less than a minute I heard the distinctive sound of a jeep. The four-cylinder “Hurricane” engine powering the machine coughed every few seconds but then smoothed out, as Pugh pulled the green vehicle in front of me. The sergeant appeared from behind me, dragging two of the canvas bags. The corporal jumped down from the Jeep, leaving it running, and raced in to get the other two bags. I kept my eyes peeled on the parking lot, trying to urge the men on without saying anything. I climbed into the passenger seat and was quickly joined by the sergeant and corporal.

“Go for it,” I said needlessly, looking up the path.

The Jeep took off, moving faster than it seemed its barely seventy horsepower engine could possibly make it go. The corporal ran through the gears, running up the path and onto the flat asphalt surface of the empty parking lot too fast for comfort, and probably too fast for safety, as well. There were no seat belts so I hung on by holding the emergency brake handle with my left hand and a curved bar projecting out from the side of the windshield in my other.

When the Jeep settled down in top gear, beginning our short highway run under the road that fed the Bay Bridge from both sides of the bay, it became quiet enough, in spite of the buffeting from the passing wind, to say something. The Jeep was a problem, I realized, in spite of the fact that it allowed us to get the bags to Marine Logistics quickly while doing so by making only one trip. The Colonel was going to return and if the Jeep was gone then there would be no excuse the sergeant and the corporal would be able to manufacture, other than the truth. And the truth wouldn't do at all.

"You've got to drop the bags and get back to the office as quick as you can, and I'll find a way to make it home on my own," I said.

The Colonel was going to be howling mad once he figured everything out. He needed to direct all of his rage at me, but he wouldn't do that if he believed for one minute that the sergeant and corporal were working with me instead of merely following orders. The use of the Jeep would serve as an open exposed



wound, if he knew about it, and allow for an avenue of questioning that might lead to more places for the Colonel to direct his rage, as well as the bags being recovered before they were shipped.

“No Officer’s Club, sir?” Corporal Pugh asked.

I only realized then that the O’Club invite was a big deal to both the sergeant and the corporal.

“Okay, you’re right,” I countered. “We drop the bags, head for the office, and exchange the Jeep for the bike.” I looked directly over at Corporal Pugh.

“The sergeant can drive me to the O’Club, and then come back and pick you up.”

“Oh, that’s okay, lieutenant,” Pugh replied. “I can jog over faster than he can make the round trip. It’s only half a mile.”

I didn’t say any more, remembering the days when a half-mile run would have been as easy for me as a regular citizen walking a city block to pick up the morning paper.

The corporal knew just where to turn, once we arrived at the Treasure Island Naval Base. The Marine guard on duty at the gate instantly took in the vehicle and the three uniformed Marines inside. He waved the Jeep through well before it passed him.

Corporal Pugh left the Jeep idling in neutral. He and the sergeant hauled one of the heavy bags in each hand up the stairs. I followed as I couldn’t maintain their pace even though they were so weighted down.

It took only minutes, once we reached the S-4’s office to scribble out the instructions for shipping.

"When will these ship?" I asked the young civilian woman working the counter.

"Tomorrow morning at 0600," she replied, opening a hinged surface of the part of the counter so the sergeant and corporal could haul the bags inside.

Once back at the Jeep, we climbed aboard the Jeep as we'd done before.

"Okay, now the best we can hope for is that the Colonel doesn't notice the files all gone missing when he returns," I said the words while wishing I'd never invited them to the club for their reward in supporting me so fully.

I should have thought of a different way. If they returned to the office and stayed until the Colonel returned, if he wasn't already back, then they could do a lot to make sure he didn't notice the missing files. The bags would go out before normal Marine Corps business hours, as almost all Marine activity in units began at 0700. The critical time was between the time the Colonel returned and the close of Marine business for the day. That time was 1600. Any time after four in the afternoon wouldn't work if the Colonel tried to call the bags back.

Corporal Pugh drove the Jeep back even faster than he drove on the earlier trip, making our travel almost a full ten minutes shorter. Pugh raced the Jeep down the path, the parking lot still empty. Everything looked okay but I couldn't be certain. The Colonel might have parked his personal car elsewhere and gotten a ride from some other officer. The sergeant jumped out and raced inside.

“The Colonel’s nowhere to be seen, sir.”

I got out of the Jeep and the Corporal pulled the vehicle back around the corner of the office, stopping only to turn the Jeep around, and then back slowly from view.

Corporal Pugh immediately jogged away, heading up the path. He was gone even before the sergeant could get the Honda started.

The trip to the Officer’s Club was short. We hadn’t passed Pugh along the way so I presumed he was waiting just inside the entrance to the beautifully built place. The sergeant parked the Dream, this time using the kickstand, at an open slot in front of the club.

I walked up to the podium set against one wall near the main entrance, which also served as the guard tower for the place, I presumed. A man in a well-tailored civilian costume, looking like something between a suit and a tuxedo, greeted me.

“Can I help you, lieutenant?” he asked.

“Yes, lunch for three,” I replied, as Corporal Pugh joined us from some unseen place he’d been waiting.

“I see,” the man said, making no move to do anything.

“You see what?” I asked, noticing that the man had not called me sir.

“What is the nature of your invitation?, he asked, his voice velvety smooth, his smile so phony it could have been painted on his face.

I said nothing, while I thought.

“An officer,” he went on, “may have two enlisted guests because normally enlisted, even NCOs and warrant officers are not permitted in the establishment without such an invitation.”

“The nature of my invitation, the one I am extending to these two fine Marines, is my recent promotion,” I lied. I knew I had first lieutenant’s papers coming but there had, as of yet, been no hint of them showing up.

“Ah, that’s perfect,” the man replied, his smile growing more sincere. “That explains fully why you’re wearing so many ribbons on your shirt.”

I instinctively looked down at the left side of my chest. I hadn’t considered the ribbons, since laboriously sliding the little things onto the thin brass bars of metal they rode on. The feeling that ran through me was first of surprise and then of a building anger. For the second time in only two days, the wearing of my decorations was being demeaned. Not as directly as the Colonel had the day before, but still the coiled snake of nasty supposition was buried quietly near the surface of the costumed man’s comment. It was like my ribbons had gone from being ‘probably fake’ to ‘maybe not fake’ in only a few seconds.

The man guided us to the worst table in the place. The restaurant was one big rectangle with the right side, away from any view of the water, and sidled up next to the back of the kitchen. The kitchen had two double doors that swung open when pushed and then closed on their own when someone passed

through. Our table was the closest to the near constantly swinging doors, yet half the tables in the restaurant were empty. I wanted to do something, or at least say something, but my combat experience took over. My mission was to get out of the place as quickly and quietly as I could. It wouldn't do to be remembered, much less booted out the front door. We ordered burgers around, cokes, fries and that was it. The waiter brought the bill. I had little money but the O'Club had to be the cheapest lunch in that part of California. Three dollars, with fifty cents for a tip. I feigned not to notice the *maître de* on our way out.

"I'll take you home on the bike," the sergeant said, not phrasing the words like a question. "Corporal, you get back to the office and hold things down. Make some files, anything. When Lightning shows up he'll walk by, but probably give you as much attention as he usually does. Act normal."

"If anything happens then follow the NCO rule," I said to Pugh. "Blame it on the officer, and, in this case, that would be me."

"Yes, sir, and thanks for lunch, sir, that was great," the corporal said, placing his cover on his head, as I did my own. He saluted before running back toward the office and I saluted back, although he was already gone.

"Good man, that corporal," I said to the sergeant.

"Yes, sir," he replied. He started the bike and let it idle for a minute, taking out a cigarette and offering me one.

I waved him off. I wasn't about to add smoking to the physical problems I already had.

"Sergeant Major," the sergeant said, leaning into the side of the bike like I'd seen real bikers in movies do. He inhaled and blew out a long stream of smoke into the mild wind. I had to admit that the effect was pretty cool.

"That's why you went to see the sergeant major yesterday," the sergeant went on, taking another inhalation of smoke.

"I went to see the commanding officer," I replied.

"The commanding officer's never there, and that left the Sgt. Major, since the C.O. has no X.O. in that unit."

"Yes," I said, giving in. The sergeant was a bright as he was observant. "It was his idea, this whole thing, but you can never let that leave your lips."

"Been to see the man a time or two myself," the sergeant said. "He's an outstanding Sergeant Major and good man besides."

"The medals," he said, pointing his smoking cigarette at my chest. "They're all real, aren't they, sir." He didn't say the phrase as if it was a question.

"Yes, they're real," I replied, knowing that the unusual conversation with a junior NCO wasn't proper about the subject, but also knowing that the sergeant had risked himself to help me.

"I guess, from the standpoint that they were officially awarded, they are real. However, I truly only deserve the Purple Heart and the National Defense

Medal. The rest are someone else's opinion about what I did."

"Interesting viewpoint, lieutenant," the sergeant replied, field stripping his cigarette and tossing the bits and pieces aside. "I never heard that one before, but I think I like the answer."

I clambered aboard the Dream, behind the sergeant, making sure to remove my pisscutter cover and tuck it firmly into my belt. Replacing the cover would be a considerably greater expense than lunch at the O'Club had been. I directed the sergeant to drop me at M&M so I could check the progress on the GTO. The Saran Wrap actually did more than hold my bandages on better and keep the leakage from spilling through. It also gave me a bit of a stiffer spine. I didn't hunch over so much, which made walking easier. The limp from the hip might never leave me, the orthopedic doctors said, but I didn't believe that. To me, the hip felt solid as a rock, with only the twinges of post-surgery pain keeping me from exercising it fully.

The sergeant pulled into the slot between the inside pumps and the building at the station. As usual, when I was not manning the office, nobody came out when the Dream's tires crossed a rubber tube and made the bell ring. I got off, thanking the sergeant profusely.

"Well, lieutenant, this may be our goodbye," he said, his voice wistful. "Don't come in tomorrow and don't take any calls. Your medical chart says you don't have to. Let the Lighting Bolt play himself out. I'll

come by if needs be, otherwise call the day after tomorrow to get the lay of the place. You got sand, I'm sure as hell happy to report that, sir."

The sergeant put the Honda in gear and accelerated out onto the street without looking back. I almost wished he'd have stayed a moment and offered me a cigarette. I'd have accepted it. The good people in my life just kept coming, and then quickly going. I didn't even know the sergeant's first name, nor the corporals for that matter. I put my cover on, straightened it as best I could, and then walked into the shop bay.

"Mickey, one of the men yelled upon seeing me. He immediately leaned over the fender of a Mustang, "You gotta see this."

Mickey slid out from under the car, making me wonder passingly, once again, why such a semi-famous racer and businessman would bother spending his time directly working on cars, no matter what the situation.

I looked around the garage. My GTO was not there and my heart sank a bit.

"It's over there," Mickey said, wiping his hands on a rag that looked worse than any I'd seen in some time. He pointed behind me. "That thin Hawaiian guy standing by the car is our driver. His name's Ongais. We call him the Fly'n Hawaiian. The car's ready."

Mickey walked over from the front of the Mustang, as I turned to peer out at my GTO, which looked almost brand new out in the sun. Mickey stepped around until he was in front of me again. He



looked me up and down, then smiled his biggest smile. "Quite a rig you've got going there, that goat. I was right about it, just as I knew I was right about you."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The car was done, we had a driver from Hawaii where I'd been raised, and Mickey Thompson had put his personal stamp of approval on me. Things were improving.

## Chapter XIX

I was surprised by the obvious difference in the way I was received at the gas station from previous visits. I knew it was the uniform, as well as the Saran treatment that kept me from looking like a weakened Hunchback of Notre Dame creature. Mickey's friends, those who worked on the cars with him, who never spoke to me, or seemed to notice me in any way, smiled and nodded when I looked over at them.

Danny Ongais slouched against the side of the GTO, as I walked out toward him. Mickey had quietly gone back to work under the Mustang. I didn't know what to make of the thin Hawaiian I moved slowly toward. He seemed like a typical Oahu local, or Kanaka, which I was not. He smoked a cigarette, glancing up at me as I approached. He didn't smile, so I didn't either.

"Your car?" he asked, not saying hello or anything else to introduce himself. I nodded. Ongais tossed his cigarette, not bothering to put it out, which seemed odd. It also seemed odd that he was so young; probably no more than a year or two older than I was. It was unlikely he'd been to the Nam or he wouldn't have had time to distinguish himself to the point where he drove for Thompson, so I didn't bother to ask. I was about to head back to the garage, and then limp home, when he spoke again.

“Get in,” he said, opening the driver’s door and setting himself behind the wheel.

I walked around the car, noticing that Ongais was belting himself into a three-point seat belt rig, the kind that went up over both shoulders and was used only in racing. I got in, slammed the door, and hunted around with my hands for my own safety harness.

“No belt,” Danny said, “don’t need it for the track.”

I understood, a little uncomfortable with that understanding. At the track, there would only be Danny making the runs, and therefore no need for passenger belts. The GTO had come without belts of any kind, having been sold prior to the Federal Law mandating them. Even if it’d come with belts, I’d purchased it used, so some things that might have been there when it was new might be long gone. Danny hit the ignition and GTO came alive, except not like its old self. It came alive like some wild animal waiting to attack. The car burbled gently but every few seconds bounced up and down, before going back to the deep-throated burble thing. Combine a quiet pervasive thunder with seconds of earthquake thrown in from time to time and the unique effect is describable.

“410 lift on the cam,” Danny said, looking straight ahead, “that’s the rock and roll part.”

I thought about my wife. There was no way she was going to want to have anything to do with the kind of jouncing action the car now exhibited, but there was no sense in saying anything. Mickey Thompson

appeared at Danny's window, so Danny opened his door. The glass windows had been replaced with clear plastic Lexan, except for the windshield, to save many pounds in weight. I wondered if Mickey would put the factory windows back in. The blender-like action of the engine vibrations might be a lot more acceptable to my wife than windows that didn't go up and down.

"The slicks are already bolted into the rims, so watch it on the corners," he said.

I didn't know what he was talking about, but the way he said the words made me feel a bit worried about going out on the highway with Ongais behind the wheel. Mickey backed up,

Danny slammed the door and then eased the GTO forward and out onto the highway. I didn't ask any questions, bracing myself into the corner where the door and seat came together. I had to do something to protect my healing torso, no matter what might be coming. As far as I knew Ongais considered me Haole slime from the island, and his willingness to give me a demonstration ride might be driven by some of that prejudice.

It was a short run to the 480 Highway heading for the Bay Bridge. The bridge was four lanes each way of the open tollway, with payment due only on the Oakland side. After a few minutes of driving the car seemed to settle down a bit in high gear, still making too much noise for true consideration as a family car, however. The road curved gently until we were under the first overhead truss of the bridge. There was no

traffic. Danny brought the car to a complete stop. I craned around, wondering what he was doing stopping in one of the middle lanes of a major tollway. Ongais brought the revolutions of the engine way up until it emitted a screaming roar. He looked quickly over at me, seemingly to make sure I was turned back around and firmly braced in my seat. The rear slicks of the GTO started spinning, adding their noise, and throwing up a great cloud of blackish gray dust that blew past the front of the car and toward Oakland. Ongais hit a small switch on the shift lever with one finger and the car launched itself forward.

I was pinned to my seat very sharply, and then there was a series of hard jerks until the engine quickly began spooling out toward its maximum revolutions. And then it was over. Danny braked the car down hard. When the acceleration had been at its highest I'd noted that the rear end of the car was actually raised up in the air, but that all changed as the front of the car dived when we nearly came to a complete halt. Danny eased the GTO off the tollway and onto Yerba Buena's main drive. He tightly turned the car around in the single lane circles that allowed for free travel without stopping and then headed the GTO back toward San Francisco. Danny said nothing, his full attention on driving. I waited, but there was no 'blast off,' like we'd experienced on the way to the island.

"What was that?" I finally asked, a bit exasperated, still recovering from the noise and

harrowing high speed the GTO had reached in such a short period of time.

“Quarter mile,” Ongais replied. “Quarter from the strut over the bridge to the turnoff. About twelve seconds, I’d estimate, and a hundred and twenty.”

I got it. He’d demonstrated the work everyone had done in getting the vehicle ready and also his own capability for driving the car at the strip. We pulled into the gas station. Danny parked the car exactly where it’d been before we left, only moments earlier. He got out and walked away. I could tell by his comportment that we might have had the last conversation we were ever likely to have.

Mickey walked toward the car.

“What’d you think?” he said, a great smile on his face.

“Wow,” was all I could think to reply.

I needed Mickey’s goodwill, and possibly that of Ongais too, as I had little money and no car. My wife, at the very least, needed a car even more because of what might happen to me following the actions I’d taken at the office. Any questions I had for Mickey would just have to wait until after the race, which was only a week away.

“I think it’ll run fine against Manfred,” he replied.

Mickey hadn’t mentioned his former partner or competitor at the event before. We walked toward the office. I knew I had to set out for home soon as my torso was beginning to ache all over and my hip was forcing a sharper limp than it had earlier. All of a

sudden, the walk home seemed farther away than I'd calculated.

"Can you work a bit?" Mikey asked, "the guys helping me can't deal with customers at all. Tell you what, you work for a couple of hours until I get this Mustang out of here and you can have the 442 for the night."

I didn't want to work, but the Oldsmobile would be a great help, particularly if I had to use it to rush to the observatory early in the morning. The sergeant's advice was sound about my staying away until things settled down but I wasn't yet ready to disobey the direct order of my commander to show up when demanded. The country was at war, and you didn't have to be in the actual area of combat to get charged with some pretty onerous crimes.

I worked until I was simply too tired to go on. Just as I was about to go into the shop part of the garage a yellow Ford Convertible pulled in, filled with young men. I went to greet them. They piled out of the car and all stared over to where the GTO sat. All five young men appeared to be my age or a bit younger. The tallest of them, the guy who'd been driving, ordered me to fill his tank with ethyl.

I looked at the car, I knew the guy was toying with me because there was no evidence of a gas cap on either fender. I walked around before I registered the car in my memory. It was a 1966 Ford Galaxy 'Seven Liter' convertible. I walked to the back of the car, reached down to the license plate, and levered the plate toward me on its hinges. The gas cap was

right under the plate. The guys looked at one another while I pumped their gas, and the looks didn't seem to be friendly.

"My Ford can take that GTO hands down," the kid said, nodding over at my car.

I sighed, finishing my chore, putting the pump back on its base, and then screwing the guy's gas cap back on. I moved to go back inside but the other boys, seemingly inadvertently, blocked my way. I stopped and waited, wondering what they could possibly have in mind.

"The GTO's purpose-built to run the quarter-mile," I said. "It's not likely your Ford, even with the 428 engine installed, would beat it, but it doesn't matter. The car's ready for the track and not to be raced on the street."

I moved through the boys, gently brushing against them as I walked until I was finally through the door and inside the office. The boys crowded in after me, all of them.

As if by design, a song played out from the transistor radio just down from the cash register. *"Just call me angel of the morning, angel, then slowly turn away from me..."*

I was back. Warmth flooded through me, replacing my initial fear. I was home and the boys had come into my living room. I would not be blinded by the light, just like the song played out.

"You got that uniform on like you're some sort of warrior prince," the leader said.



"I'm not a prince, merely a lieutenant," I replied, breathing in and out slowly like I'd used to do in the valley, to get control of myself and reduce the terror I once had but no longer really felt.

The boys were trouble. I was in no shape to handle physical trouble, but there was nothing inside me to signal that. I was ready.

"What do you weigh, about a hundred pounds?" the leader said, laughing and pointing at my chest. "You got that bent over twig look going for you too. I thought hot shot Marines like you, with that crap all over your chest, would be a whole lot more man than you are."

The boy's friends laughed.

"The crap is called ribbons," I replied, my voice carefully modulated to be low and soft. "Most of the ribbons represent medals I got doing stuff like most people won't do, or can't do, or don't live through doing," I finished saying the words, knowing that I should simply keep my mouth shut. It didn't seem a good time or place to admit that I didn't feel like I deserved most of the ribbons.

Suddenly, the medals were my medals, and they were my Marine's medals, and those guys had paid with their lives so I could wear them.

Mickey Thomson suddenly walked through the door, as if an apparition from nowhere.

"How you doing, lieutenant?" he asked, his words quiet but firm, like the brushing of water going over a low set of rocks in a stream, "Need to take a break?"

"I could use a visit to the restroom," I said, before coming around the counter and walking through the gathered boys.

I walked out the door, and then went around the building, so I wouldn't be able to hear anything of what might be going on between Micky and the boys. I didn't move around the corner of the building until I heard the very distinctive sound of the Seven Liter's dual exhausts roaring off.

I walked back around the corner of the building. Mickey stood inside the office. I moved toward him. He leaned down behind the cash register. He pulled out the oversized crowbar I'd put under the counter days before, just in case of some bad encounter.

Mickey slapped the big bar heavily into the meaty palm of his left hand.

"You were expecting to beat the shit out of them with this?" he asked with a cold smile.

I stared at the man and then told him the truth.

"No, I had no intention of beating the shit out of them." We continued to look at one another for a few seconds longer.

Mickey put the bar down and walked out the door.

"I need a cigarette," he said, stopping to light one just outside the door.

I joined him outside, not wanting to take a puff of his cigarette because my hands were shaking, which they had not done since I'd gotten home.

"You know," Mikey said, "down in L.A. and in my other businesses, I run with a pretty tough crowd.

When you get healed up I think I could really use somebody like you. For right now though, lose the uniform before you come here. That was their real gripe. They wouldn't go to the war or missed the war, or whatever, and they feel less of men about that. There's probably going to be a good bit more of that in your life as time goes by unless you don't let people like them know." He stopped, looked over at the GTO that Ongais was still polishing, and took another drag from his cigarette.

He blew it out into the sun-warmed afternoon wind. "Instead, let them know who you are, I meant," he continued softly, before finishing, "What you are.

"The man was amazing", I thought to myself. I had no return for anything he'd said, so I didn't say anything.

He knew. Somehow, he'd gleaned from the situation, and my single laconic comment, that I had had no intention of hurting the boys. I had been intending to kill them. I left through the office opening and Mickey went back to working on the Mustang. The keys were in the 442. I pulled the Cutlass onto the highway and then turned the corner to head the half-mile, or less, down my street toward home. There was nobody on street at all, pedestrians or vehicles. I pushed the accelerator to the floorboard of the 442, and the smooth wonderfully handling convertible became a brute. I hit about seventy in no time at all, before I quickly brought the speed back down. I smiled to myself as I idled the rest of the way down the street. The boys would very likely have been

beaten by the stock 442, much less the specially prepared GTO, as it was lighter and more powerful than the big Galaxy, not that it mattered. I got out of the car. I didn't have Mickey's kind of 'leave the keys in the car' kind of trust so I took them in with me. I put the top up because the dew of San Francisco mornings was nearly as heavy in moisture as a light rainfall.

I waited downstairs for a full fifteen minutes until my hands were no longer shaking. I thought long and hard about my near encounter with the boys. I would have likely caused terminal damage if things had gone further. That could never happen again. If I killed another man in my culture then I was going to go to prison for a time so long that family and friends would not matter anymore. I could not do that to my wife and daughter. And the boys were just nasty young men with their own issues. They would probably work through them, given time. I went up the stairs slowly, thinking about the buck sergeant and his advice.

I did indeed need to avoid the direct confrontation with Lightning Bolt. He was no match for my mindset but I was no match for carefully gauging, and then measuring my response, so I could survive in a culture that mythically encouraged killing and maiming in almost all of its movie and television shows while in real life charging draconian prices from anyone who actually did those things.

Mary answered the door as if she'd been waiting intently for me to knock. I got inside. It took only moments to get my clothes off and have her cut the

Saran Wrap away. It'd felt so good to have its support all day but the cloying material was such a relief to get off I wasn't sure I'd be able to wear it the next day. But I knew that the next day was coming and I also knew I could finally take a shower. Two days passed. During that time, I ventured forth on the first day, wrapped in my plastic, over to the station in the morning for a few minutes; just to let Mickey know I'd be in the following day and to see if I could keep the 442 for another day. I'd rummaged through my rucksack to find sweat clothes, tennis shoes, and a light jacket that was from my college days, so I could avoid wearing my uniform when it wasn't called for. The back of the sweatshirt was adorned with a green knight riding an equally green horse while carrying a green jousting lance. Nobody ever said anything about it but I considered it my strangest piece of clothing. The Green Knights had been the name of my college sporting teams.

Mickey grunted from under the Mustang, but that was it. I took off to Rockaway beach, down the coast a bit, with my wife, to play in the shallows of the cold ocean, and then try to race her across the sand. She won all our short races. I had no endurance. I was good for about fifteen yards, and then my 'running' was reduced to something that more closely resembled a walk. My wife gloried beating me. Julie stayed with Pat back at the apartment because the second day was a Saturday and Pat was off for the day. We couldn't take Julie to the beach and be more than a few feet away from her at any time. There had

been no calls at all on Friday, that first day, not that we took or Pat reported. The big race was to be on the following Thursday.

Ongais showed up at the gas station not long after I did the next morning, Saturday. He carried some old wash towels and a flat blue can. I watched him move directly to the GTO. He opened the can, set it near a back tire, and then went to work. I couldn't believe my eyes when I quickly figured out what he was doing. He was waxing my car. I went into the garage to ask Mickey about it, Mickey who never seemed to take much of a break, even for lunch, and then went at it for seven days a week.

"He's a quiet guy and keeps to himself," Micky said. "He's all about racing and that's about it. I know nothing about his personal life, or even if he has one. That's Blue Coral he's putting on your goat. That stuff's impossible to work with. Hasn't ever waxed one of my cars."

Ongais worked away, bringing the paint of the GTO to a shine it hadn't known since its first day off the assembly line. I decided to say nothing. Obviously, the man, whether he approved of Haoles or not, had to approve of me or he seemingly wouldn't have bothered to do the back-breaking work of applying the wax and then rubbing it off.

I knew none of us had much time left at the station, however, because a For Sale sign had gone up on the corner part of where the pumps were located, and also the number of cars to be worked on had dwindled down to almost none.

I went home for a break, a change of bandages, and my plastic wrap. I arrived at the same time as a blue Navy car from the base on Treasure Island. I parked in the apartment driveway and walked over to the double-parked official vehicle.

"You looking for me?" I asked, not bothering to identify myself.

"You the officer on this envelope?" the driver asked back.

I looked at the string-tied eight-and-a-half-by-eleven envelope. It wasn't difficult to read my name and rank scrawled across the front of it. I took the envelope in my right hand, wondering what it could have in it, but knowing whatever it was I probably wasn't going to like it.

"Orders," the driver said, rolling his window up and starting the car. I stepped back and the car pulled away.

I sat on the stairs leading up to the door to our apartment. I worked to calm myself. In some ways, I would rather have had the direct confrontation with the Colonel rather than be the subject of his silent response, which was very probably what was inside the envelope.

There was nowhere to go or to hide, and opening the envelope in front of Mary and Pat upstairs would accomplish nothing. At least I might have a chance to prepare myself, I realized. After opening the envelope there wasn't going to be much of the hiding of anything because all of us were deeply involved together.

I unwound the string from its small spool and then tore open the envelope. There had been no return address on the outside of the big envelope but the thin sheaf of papers was flagrantly stamped "Headquarters Marine Corps" in red. No papers could have come all the way from Washington in the short time between when I signed all the approvals at the office and now. Permission had to have been given and approvals reached in D.C. to allow that origination designation.

After my name, rank, serial number, and date information, my new duty station was typed in bold-face letters: "Headquarters Company, 2/7, 1stMarDiv, "I" Corps, Republic of South Vietnam."

I was staggered. I was ordered back into the combat zone of Vietnam, only weeks following major surgery. How could that be? The 'Second of the Seventh' was a renowned great unit but I wasn't in any condition to serve at all inside a war-torn environment. My departure date out of Travis Air Force Base, the base I'd flown into only months before, nearly torn to shreds, would be my exit back into the war.

I walked upstairs in shock, beginning to understand that I was nothing more or less, outside of the A Shau Valley and real combat than an FNG. The Marine Corps back home was a place of mystery and politics slathered all over with lubrication of deception and injustice.

I didn't use my key to the locked door at the top of the stairs. I knocked softly, instead. There was no



point in rushing the kind of news I was carrying in my right hand

## Chapter XX

I walked outside the office and onto the gravel trail leading up to the parking lot I'd come down from earlier in the day. I heard a motorcycle start up behind me. I stopped and turned. The motorcycle drove slowly up to me on the gravel. I stepped off to one side. Then I saw it was the sergeant driving the cycle. I let out a sigh. It had never occurred to me that the sergeant would have anything other than a car.

"Want a lift?" he said, as the machine under the sergeant purred away.

"Honda 305 Dream," the sergeant said, pulling his goggles up. "Hop on, or crawl on, in your case. Every day I can pick you up in the parking lot, drive you down to the office, and then back when you're ready to go."

I crawled onto the sleek black machine. I didn't comment on the fact that neither my wife nor I had our car back running, and the cars we borrowed were not always available to borrow. Even if everything worked out perfectly, I would owe Sears and Roebuck for the rest of my life, not just for the loan of the money but for helping my family survive in its worst time. Mickey Thompson was another case entirely. He never ever discussed my owing anything, loaned me his car, and even tossed me a few dollars when I did something extra to earn it.

The bike handled the gravel like it was built for it until we got onto the asphalt. I'd had a Triumph

motorcycle when I was a sophomore in college, but the Dream was a wonder compared to that hacking, it'll start someday and run like a lump of coal rolling down the road kind of thing in comparison. After three accidents in six months and a Bell helmet cracked right down the center, I swore to my girlfriend, and soon-to-be future wife, that I'd never ride a motorcycle again, but here I was. I was relieved to ride it, however, as the walk down to the office had been taxing and the walk back up would have been even tougher.

The gate was in the center of the road, once you got under the main thoroughfare of the bridge traffic passing overhead. A building sat to the left side of the road, while giant palms ran, seemingly forever, from the building further into the base. There was no traffic. Church stopped the bike as a Marine PFC held up one white-gloved hand.

"You don't have a base sticker?" I whispered into the sergeant's right ear.

"Hundred percent I.D. on this base," the sergeant replied, pulling his wallet from his left rear pocket.

I did the same. I was reminded of the nuclear comment. Almost all military bases required identification stickers, but not this one. Evidently, they cared a whole lot less about auto or cycle insurance, registration, and any of that much less than they did about military identity.

The Marine leaned over and peered down at my I.D. card, then snapped to attention and did a perfect hand salute. I hadn't put my piss cutter cover on for

the motorcycle ride, so I couldn't salute back. I merely nodded, and then put away my identification.

The sergeant pulled the 305 from the guard checkpoint at a very slow speed. Military bases around the country were almost zero tolerant when it came to speeding around on the base, given that the services are filled with so many young people that are a bit impulsive and expressive. I peered out past Church's left shoulder. The road ahead, lined with the giant palms on its left side, ran the length of the base in a straight line. I made no attempt to say anything to the sergeant, as he knew where I was going and, obviously, how to get there. There were no traffic control devices on the main road or at least none that we encountered. About halfway down, without warning, Church leaned the bike to the right and entered a street marked with an "H" painted atop what looked like a grounded and dug into one-by-six wooden board. In front of what was obviously the administration building the sergeant made a U-turn and pulled the bike up to a row of white-painted rocks that served as a curb in front of the place. He turned the bike off but didn't get off. I crawled off from behind him.

"You got about twenty minutes, sir," Sergeant Church said, lighting up a cigarette he'd tapped out of a red and white Marlboro pack. "Twenty minutes gives me about half an hour to get to your place in Daly City and back, long as you don't mind a little bobbing and weaving through the traffic."

"I didn't call my wife," I began, trying to explain that I hadn't called her for a ride, not that she probably couldn't come for me even if I'd reached her, not in mid-day, and not with the vagaries of Mickey's 442 availability or the needs of a less than one-year-old child because Mary was alone with Julie. Pat worked until five.

"Half an hour, sir," the sergeant said, blowing a puff of smoke into the warm windy air.

Somehow, the sergeant had been able to guess that my life was being held together with threads, his having to help me in the bathroom no doubt contributing to his conclusion. Why could I not get along with other officers almost not at all but enlisted NCOs were almost, one and all, wonderful to me?

I checked my Timex and made for the stairs leading up to the double door entrance to the place. Once inside I stopped and pressed my back into the closed-door I'd just come through, trying to get rid of the ache running up and down my torso and trying to straighten my shoulders back, but it was no use. Neither the ache nor my shoulders were in a cooperating mood.

I noted immediately that the barracks was commanded by a major, which made sense since I thought the commander of the entire base was probably only a Navy captain. The captain would outrank the major. Next to a black and white picture of the major was an imposing shot of a man who looked more like a 'real Marine' than anyone I'd seen in some time. Hard eyes, a bit aged, lantern jaw. His rank was

sergeant major. I held my cover in my right hand, having had to wear it once I got off the bike for the walk up to the office entrance. I didn't want to replace it in my belt in case my blouse leaked through. Wearing a stained coat was one thing, but a stained cover would never be overlooked.

I approached the commanding officer's door but entered without knocking. Through the glass windows, I could see a counter and people working behind that counter. The commander's actual office had to be smaller and probably behind the working area I witnessed. I stepped up to the counter. A woman noticed me and walked over.

"What can I do for you lieutenant?" she asked, with a smile.

"I need to see the commanding officer," I said.

"Maneuvers," the woman replied. "Won't be back for two weeks. Somewhere called Twenty-Nine Palms down south. Sounds delightful. I wonder if there really are twenty-nine palms there."

No commanding officer. I thought for a few seconds.

"The sergeant major in?" I asked, hoping she'd say he wasn't.

"Want me to announce you?" the woman asked. "But then, you're an officer and outrank him so you don't have to be announced. His office is against the wall over there," she pointed behind her, "His title's on it. The door's closed but that shouldn't matter to you."

I noted that the two other women, both civilians, like the woman in front of me, had stopped working to

look up. I didn't take that as a good sign. They were eager for me to go over and disturb the sergeant major, no matter what he might be doing in his office. The man's appearance in the photograph had probably perfectly captured his attitude and comportment.

"Announce me," I said.

The woman's smile got larger. "Got it, did you?" she replied.

She stepped away and headed for the sergeant major's door. She knocked three times but said nothing.

The door opened almost immediately. I could not hear what was said, but the sergeant major towered over the woman by almost a foot, and the woman hadn't been that much shorter than I was, especially in my hunched-over condition.

The sergeant major disappeared. The woman walked back to stand in front of me again.

"The sergeant major will see you," she said, then whispered, "like he has any choice."

I got the distinct feeling that the woman had no use for the sergeant major but I said nothing, merely following her after she raised a hinged panel on the counter and let me through.

The woman opened the door in front of me and then closed it when I stepped through. I felt like she'd guided me into a lion's den at the zoo. I almost wanted to check the door behind me to see if it automatically locked, but I didn't.

The sergeant-major came quickly to his feet and stood at attention behind his desk, surprising me.

"I'm the new adjudication officer over at the lighthouse," I said, forgetting to give him my name or rank.

"What can I do for you, sir," the sergeant major replied, staring straight ahead, right through me.

"Stand at ease, or sit at ease," I replied, looking over at the only other chair in the room, up against the wall.

I made for the chair, pulling it out and then placing it directly in front of the sergeant major's desk before sitting down.

"I need your advice," I breathed out, not wanting to say the words but I had absolutely no place else to go.

"That's a new one, sir," the sergeant major laughed out. "A junior officer needs my enlisted advice." He said the last sentence with no humor in his voice at all.

"Yes," I said. "I'm in trouble and don't know what to do."

I noted the sergeant major's decorations for the first time. His chest looked like my own, rows of ribbons, with both the Korean and Vietnam campaign ribbons. He had a purple heart. A tendril of hope rose up inside me.

"Marine Sergeant Major to Marine Lieutenant, or man to man, sir?" he asked.

There was no beating around the bush with this Marine, I realized. Either I was to take a risk and trust



him or simply make an uncomfortable situation even worse.

"Where'd you get hit?" he suddenly asked me, not waiting for my response to his previous question.

"Three in the torso," I replied, knowing the obviously weathered and bright man had to have seen my ribbons and noted my physical presentation.

"No, that's kind of obvious," the sergeant major replied. "I meant, where in-country were you hit?"

"A Shau Valley," I replied, wondering if that horrid crease in the earth, thousands of miles away, would ever dim in my consciousness. I already knew it would never leave.

"Rock Pile," the sergeant major said, his conclusive tone seeming to indicate that there was no more to be discussed. The Rock Pile in South Vietnam was located close to Khe Sanh, only a few thousand meters from the A Shau, toward the sea, and like down in the valley, a lot of Marines had died there.

"What is it?" the sergeant major asked.

I started with my release from Oak Knoll but very quickly went into the nightmare I was just beginning to experience with Lightning Bolt. I detailed just about everything I could remember of the dialogue between the colonel and myself. I looked at my watch. I had fifteen minutes to get any help I might get before I had to get back to the sergeant or forego a ride home.

"I pulled a bit of a better billet, that's for damn sure," the sergeant major said, once I was done. "The major almost never shows up and then almost never

talks when he does show up. The Officers Club over on Yerba in the tower is Lightning's hangout, and I support him hanging out there all I can."

I waited, trying not to show my impatience. The sergeant-major was running on about himself while I sat miserably in front of him. I wondered if he was prolonging my agony in order to do the sometimes obnoxious enlisted/officer tap dance, wherein officers were portrayed as effete lazy snobs and the enlisted men as hardworking strong 'real' Marines.

"Okay, here's what you do," the sergeant major said, surprising me once again with his directness and willingness to help.

"You're the Marine Corps Adjudication Officer for this region or zone, or however they break the world apart for that sort of thing. Your commanding officer is not the adjudication officer. He's your commanding officer, which means he has nothing to do with the decisions you make or any of the rest of it when it comes to the adjudication part. His job is making sure you are there and do the work."

"Yes?" I asked after he'd stopped talking for almost half a minute and did not go on.

"You're going to go in tomorrow, sign, and then stamp every one of those cases and files as approved. You get up and leave. Call Lightning the next day and tell him to call you when more claims come in."

"My God," was all I could get out. The audacity of the plan was more than shocking. It was stunning. "He'll have me court-martialed for certain on that one."

“He’s screwed,” the sergeant major said. “He’s not the adjudication officer so he can’t change, certify or do a damned thing. If he reports you, then neither can anybody else change your decisions on the cases, not without a nuclear explosion going off that will certainly cost Lightning Bolt his career, if not more.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, a shot of excitement traveling up and down the center of my body, followed by small bolts of fear.

“You won’t have to call or stop by to let me know what happens,” the sergeant major said, a great smile opening up to cross his face. “I should be able to hear the results all the way over on this island.”

At that, he slid a card across the desk toward me. It was the major’s Marine Corps card with the eagle, globe, and anchor in gold on its surface. Major Martin Bullman was crossed out, and the sergeant-major had written his own name under it.

I took the card and smiled, mostly to myself. The sergeant-major was having some of his own problems with his commanding officer but saying nothing about it, other than the hint the card modification gave away.

“I can’t thank you enough sergeant-major,” I said, grasping the card and then standing to leave.

“Quite some ribbons you have on that uniform,” the sergeant major replied, getting to his own feet.

“It wouldn’t seem to me that you were any kind of regular company-grade officer over in the Nam, and you sure as hell don’t give that impression now. Before you leave the islands, we’ll have to have a

drink up in the Officer's Club over on your side. They let me in as a sergeant major, although I'm not sure why."

"Thanks again, sergeant major," I said, standing and extending my left hand

The sergeant took it, gripping my hand more gently than I would have guessed. He held my hand a few seconds longer than was necessary

"They play hardball back here, so, as quickly as you can get yourself a glove," the sergeant major said, letting go of my hand. "Until then remember the Marine Corps motto."

"Motto?" I asked.

"If you can't baffle them with your bullshit then dazzle them with your footwork."

The sergeant-major smiled at me with a twinkle in his eyes. I would be sure to contact him again, no matter what happened, I realized.

I rushed from the sergeant major's office, glancing down at my Timex. I had only two minutes to make it to the bike, although I knew in my heart that the buck sergeant would never desert me. I lifted my head as I limped down the steps, using the railing for support. I had a plan. I hadn't had a plan for anything in some time. The last real plan I'd had in the A Shau had cost a lot of Marines their lives. It was such a release to know that my plans now would not cost lives, not if I could help it.

The motorcycle ride was tougher than I thought it would be. Without goggles, I had to keep my head out of the slipstream, which meant I couldn't see much of

anything or where we were going. Our speed was such that there wasn't any real opportunity to talk either, or I would have had the sergeant drop me off at M&M. The race was important to me for reasons I couldn't explain, even to me. When I was in front of the apartment in Daly City, I turned, once I got myself off the bike with some difficulty and thanked the sergeant.

"See you at zero seven hundred," I said.

"What about Vince Lombardi time?" the sergeant asked, a sly smile crossing his face.

"Screw Vince Lombardi. He's a Green Bay Packer and this is the United States Marine Corps," I replied. "See you at zero seven hundred."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, with a smile and some enthusiasm.

I realized I could not make the walk to M&M. I had to go inside. My bandages were probably soaked through. I also knew that I was wearing my Class "A" uniform with blouse the next day. My orders said Class "A" and that was the order I would follow. If the colonel wanted to court-martial me then I was ready for that. The sergeant-major had not only given me a plan but put some spine back into my attitude and my step.

I went inside, taking my time, assured of nothing but no longer afraid of whatever it was that the Marine Corps could throw at me.

My wife was a wonder, although I avoided telling her anything about how the day had really gone. I was

not going to be swayed by the plan the sergeant major had laid out for me.

I collapsed onto the couch in the living room, but I knew the peace of a quick nap or simply a short period to lie down and recover from the day's events wasn't going to happen. A very small person made her way across the room, sort of crawling, sort of walking, and using every bit of furniture to beeline for the couch. Julie was glad I was home. How could I not respond to that kind of totally accepting and open greeting?

The debate going on inside my mind could not be quieted. I had bandages to change and a uniform to get out of. I only had two khaki long sleeve shirts, and, although the officer shirts required by the Marine Corps were wonderfully made of the best quality materials, how long could the shirts endure the constant leakage of blood?

Mary washed the shirts first in cold milk, which worked every time, but I still wondered. How long would it take for the incision to heal, and what was I to do about wearing the Class "C" short sleeve shirt that was a whole lot thinner and would not hold me together at all?

Mary walked into the room carrying a small thin box.

"Here it is, the solution to the problem," she said, tossing the box over Julie's head, to land on the couch next to me.

It was a box of Saran Wrap, I saw immediately. I recoiled back from it automatically, then looked up at Mary.

“Something wrong?” she asked, reading the expression on my face that I hadn’t been quick enough to hide.

Saran Wrap, the effective tool the North Vietnamese Army had been clever enough to field down in the A Shau Valley. Tightly wrapping their bodies with the thin plastic substance allowed them to charge into the fire of very high velocity, but low mass, M-16 bullets. Instead of the bullets tumbling, like they mostly did when hitting something as water-filled as a human torso, the quarter-inch in diameter bullets would simply race right on through. The soldiers could keep charging. The wrap was the solution to my physical problem, I realized, but the psychological problem of using the wrap in that way made me almost nauseous. The graphic mind photos that appeared before me, of the wrapped bodies penetrated by thousands of flechettes fired by the Ontos, nearly replaced the reality of my wife and daughter standing in front of me.

“Nothing,” I got out, breathing shallow and trying to hide my feelings.

“Let’s get you changed and try this out,” Mary replied, choosing to ignore my rather obvious negative reaction to the plastic wrap.

I would wear it and I’d also drive down the mental demons that had risen up at the sight of the box.

Saran Wrap, had, after all, been invented right after WWII, a long time before the Vietnam war. It'd been invented to cover the wings of exposed aircraft left out in the open for storage, and so it would cover me. I needed to get over to check on the GTO and I needed to be able to be presentable for whatever new command I would probably be very shortly assigned to, either that or the brig.

In the bathroom, I looked at myself in the mirror before I changed. The Sergeant Major had given me two platitudes, but they were platitudes that would help me survive the remaining time I had in the Corps. I'd figure out as quickly as I could what might serve as a 'glove' in the game of the peacetime Marine Corps I'd been thrust back into, and tomorrow I would go to my Yerba Buena Island office and 'dazzle them with my footwork.' I stripped off my shirt, tossed the bandages I eased from my torso, and called through the open door for my wife, as Julie had crawled right along with me to end up sitting on my right foot.

When Mary came in, I handed her the box of Saran Wrap and applied new four-by-fours up and down the outside of my center incision. I extended my arms out from my sides when I was done, and Mary went to work wrapping my torso tightly. The NVA had prepared for combat in exactly that same way I was preparing for it.

They'd gone out and been hit, as I would be on the morrow, but they'd not gone down. I was determined not to go down.



## Chapter XXI

The crowd was stirred up for the coming run, as Danny Ongais climbed into the GTO and belted up. Mickey and his helpers, many more than had been around before, gathered behind the car and pushed it to a place just a few feet from the starting line. The near-identical GTO in the outer lane from the small grandstand was the same color, the same body style, although it motored on its own to take a place with its front tires right on the starting line. Ongais was giving away a few feet simply because he didn't want to idle the engine and possibly give away the fact that the headers were too loud, what with the eighth of an inch holes Smokey had drilled through the top of each of the eight pipes.

Everyone backed off and the cars were announced. I was expecting what came in the announcement about my GTO but it still hurt a little to hear it:

*"The 1966 stock Pontiac GTO hardtop running a factory 389 with three deuces, driven by Danny Ongais."*

The record books, if the car won, would likely forever show that Mickey and Danny had won the race.

The Christmas Tree lights cycled up and down three times, and then settled with only the top lights on, and waiting. There was a smaller 'tree' in the center, just ahead of the two racers, with lights on

both sides of it. The top two lights were lit there, as well.

Danny turned over the engine of the GTO, while the other GTO brought its engine's revolutions up to a screaming maximum. The lights began to cycle down, blink on and off as they descended, one after another, until only one light remained at the bottom. The crowd remained totally quiet. After a slight delay, all of the last lights lit up together.

Both cars took off in first gear, more smoke coming from Danny's competitors' rear tires than his own. From the stands, it looked like both cars ran together without any advantage of one over the other, but the billboard at the end of the quarter-mile was clearly visible with its huge numbers reading out the time of each racer.

Both sets of numbers on the far billboard stopped changing, as the GTO's finished their runs. Danny's first number 13.03 and the number next to that was 106. Mickey's competitor ran at 13.66 and 103. The second number I knew was in miles per hour. My GTO had just become the Winternationals E Stock Eliminator.

The crowd went wild. Mickey stood between the Christmas Tree lights and took bows.

I looked out to see what had happened to my car. All I saw was a blue shape aboard a trailer being towed away. I was amazed at just how fast Mickey's guys had followed his directions. I knew I wouldn't be riding in the pickup truck home. It was already on the highway headed for the gas station.

I found Mickey, hanging back with some of the other drivers and mechanics near where we'd prepared the GTO. His mood was not what I expected. Before I could say anything, he spoke.

"It was all a waste," he said, his tone one of dejection, a tone I'd never heard from him before. "He was disqualified after the race, so I didn't really beat him officially at all. It's like he was never here."

"But you're E Stock Eliminator at this year's Winternationals," I reminded him, with a smile on my face.

"E Stock," one of the mechanics, who almost never spoke, replied. "E Stock to Mickey Thompson is like A.J. Foyt winning a go-cart race."

I knew A.J. Foyt's name but not well. I knew he'd won several of the Indianapolis 500 races, but that was about it. I got the message, though.

E Stock was nothing to Mickey, at the level where he raced and lived. He would be E Stock Eliminator for the rest of his life in the official records but it meant nothing to him. It would certainly have meant something to me but that was, apparently, immaterial.

"Let's get back," Mickey said, cleaning his hands with some orange goop and a few rags. Water was a precious commodity in the informal pits of drag racing, and not to be wasted washing hands or other body parts. "Jump in the 442. We've got to get back and have the guys rebuild your goat for the street."

The journey was a silent one. Mickey kept the top down on the 442 and drove like a madman as if

he was angry about something. I could not understand what was bothering him, but what with the wind and very rare periods of stopped silence, there was not much I could offer or question.

Mickey was E Stock Eliminator and I was the guy who needed his only car back in some sort of street-driving condition.

The shop was quiet when we got there, nobody on duty to wait on gasoline customers. I immediately went to the office, finding it unlocked as usual, and set the register for business.

Mickey was prowling around the mechanical shop part of the station when I found him in the back. He gave every appearance of wandering about the place with no real intent.

"What are you doing, boss?" I asked, not understanding why the amazing man in front of me seemed so lost.

"You've been great, " Mickey said, not paying attention at all to what I'd asked him. "Your car and all the other stuff...your amazing wife, your kid, and all the strange stuff I've heard about you. Thanks for being a part of this. Your car will be ready in two days. I think I wanted to be more like you."

I didn't know what to say. It was like the man wanted to have a deeper friendship between us and wasn't capable of making that move or accepting such a move in return

The strange beep generated by a car running over the small diameter lengthy hose out in front of the station made a small bell ding.

“You got customers,” Mickey said. Keep the money today. You’re going to need it as you get new instructions. Man, you have a great wife.”

Mickey left in the 442, making no tire screeching or racing takeoff to get into the traffic passing by on the nearby highway. I worked the rest of the day, taking in small sums of money. I put the cash into the register. I wasn’t about to leave the shop or station and have anybody think I wasn’t grateful for all that had been done for me. I worked for two days until the guys were ready with my GTO.

The GTO ran like a dream, but only at RPMs above 3,000 of the specially prepared V8. Three thousand was twenty-three hundred above the engine’s idle speed. Although Mickey had been more than kind enough to change out the racing slicks back to street tires (which had also required new rear rims because of the wood screws he’d used to hold the slicks to the rims for the elimination run) and replaced the plexiglass side and back windows with the original (and much heavier) real glass, the engine had not been gone back into. The higher compression, requiring more expensive fuel, and the high-lift cam made any operation of the engine, under the three thousand, an adventure experience not unlike sitting inside a giant blender filled with rocks with the speed adjustment set to a variable. Gasoline was thirty cents a gallon but with the GTO now getting somewhere around six miles per gallon, as long as the accelerator was not pushed on too hard for too long, that still meant that filling the tank cost six bucks. Six bucks for

a tank when my total pay from the Marine Corps was three hundred and thirty a month. The car also only held twenty gallons, so even when filled the brim of the downspout it could only travel about a hundred and ten to twenty miles on a tank.

My wife hated the car. She'd not liked it before but still learned to drive it, even though she was only five feet tall and could barely operate the clutch with the driver's seat all the way forward. Mickey had installed a thirty-five-pound clutch for the race. Now, Mary could push the clutch down with her foot but only hold it down for about ten seconds which didn't work well on any of San Francisco's hills where stop lights and signs were all over the place. Trying to wait on a hill behind traffic with the clutch pushed in fully or the transmission in neutral was a bother to me but sometimes impossible for her. She also hated the sound, any kind of real acceleration, but mostly the money the GTO consumed.

I loved the car. I loved that it started, every time almost instantly. I loved the sound and I loved the acceleration, understanding after some street racing myself that what Mickey had said was most probably totally true. He'd said that there was no production car outside of a 427 special built and very rare Shelby Cobra that could beat my GTO, not without pretty extreme modifications.

I was on my own for most of the day. Mary, Pat, and Julie were off to some shopping center across the Bay in Sausalito, where I knew they'd spend most of the day, even though neither of them had much

money. My wife only drove the GTO if it was absolutely required and even then, would not drive it up any of the hills in or around San Francisco, which pretty much left almost all driving out of the question.

I sat in the car for a few minutes before starting it. Mickey and Smokey were gone, the cars he'd been working on gone as well. One of Mickey's mechanics pumped gas, although could go in at any time and run the operation, as no more mechanical work was being done. I was due to report at Camp Pendleton in two weeks so there was not much time left. Mickey and Smokey had gone south to San Pedro, or somewhere south in the state. Camp Pendleton wasn't far from the speed shop Mickey had there but I had a feeling that I'd never see either man again.

The night before I'd sat up into early morning hours. There were no fields of fire to be surveyed for the potential of coming enemy action. The small apartment window, offering the only view available from the place, didn't allow for much in the way of observable paranoia. I'd spent some time simply going through the thick San Francisco telephone book looking for certain names once all three network test patterns came on, indicating, following a short military equipment film and the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner, that television transmission was done for the night.

I'd found Fessman's parents' names unless there were more than one couple named Mr. & Mrs. Randall Tarndale Fessman out there somewhere. That Fessman's parents would live so close to where

I ended up seemed a stretch but I'd already been introduced to some really strange coincidences in my life Their address was in Sausalito, across the Golden Gate Bridge, and on the northern shore of the bay.

I decided that I was going to take a swing around the bay, across the Golden Gate to Sausalito, try to visit Fessman's parents, over the Richards Bridge to the west side of the bay and then swing on down and stop at the lighthouse. The tolls for all three bridges would total almost three dollars. I had the money, and not much more, because of the pocket change, Mickey gave me at the station. My wife had complained to the Colonel in Washington, while she was on the phone getting my orders changed, about the fact that my pay had never come through. The Colonel promised that I would be paid at the instant I reported into my new command, so I had to be careful of every dime.

I knew I had to get into uniform, and I would have to do so for the first time without any assistance from my wife. The buttons might be difficult, but I could not show up at Fessman's parent's home in civilian attire. I needed to let them know what had happened to their son from the commanding officer who'd been there when he died, and I needed to look like that commanding officer. And then there was the matter of Lightning Bolt. I could not let that go. Someone had to stand up for the Marine Corps and for all the Marines the man had violated over the years. If things went south then I wanted to be



wearing my officers' bars and Green Class "A" uniform for one last time.

I pulled the Colt down from the top shelf of our bedroom closet. The wooden presentation box was heavy, mostly from the weight of the four-pound weapon. I opened the box and read the inscription carved into a brass plate glued to the red silk of the backing: "Military Skills Award, presented to Second Lieutenant...and so on..." I realized at that moment I had no holster for the weapon. I pulled it from the box, depressed the magazine release detent, and quickly observed that I had one in the chamber and five in the magazine, just as I'd learned from the NRA shoots I'd been on as a kid, and the habit of underloading I'd taken with me to Vietnam. I had no place to position the automatic on my body. Sticking it in the back of my trousers would not work. That worked only in the movies. In real life, such a placement of a heavy weapon would only end up falling out under any duress at all or, worse, maybe causing the carrier to lose some vital anatomical parts accidentally.

There was only one option. I'd have to place the weapon on the passenger seat, maybe with a paper bag or section of the newspaper over it. I set the automatic aside, leaving the single round in the chamber, the five in the magazine re-inserted into the butt of the automatic. I clicked the safety on. I hadn't felt the kind of warm security I felt since before I'd left the Basic School, seemingly so long ago. I knew inside my very being that I was not a predator among predators anymore. I was a predator among prey.

I got into the uniform blouse using a bottle cap opener. The opposite end to the cap opener was a bent pry end kind of thing. I put the pry end in the buttonhole, and then pried the coat closed, buttonhole by buttonhole, securing each button when the opening was in the perfect position to do so.

I was ready. I went downstairs, locking up behind me. With any luck at all, the women would never even know I'd left the apartment. I carried the Colt inside a folded section of the morning paper. Once inside the GTO, I placed it carefully on the seat next to me. I would not have any need of the weapon until I got to the lighthouse, if then. If I got pulled over, then the seat next to me was occupied by a newspaper, not an automatic Colt .45.

The trip across the Golden Gate was fast and easy. I noted that fifty miles per hour in top gear was running at three thousand rpm. No wonder the car had only made it to 106 miles per hour in the quarter-mile. Its top speed was geared exactly to that. The GTO got to top speed extremely quickly but then topped out at a relatively slow 106 miles per hour. A big block Pontiac station wagon would hit 113 mph, but not get there nearly as quickly.

I found the Fessman home without trouble. It was set into the side of a long row of nearly identical three-step walk-ups, all made of brick with small perfectly kept grass lawns out front. The number on the door of the Fessman house was 821, written in bright white letters against the shiny lacquer black paint of the door.

I parked my GTO across the street at an empty curb slot. I checked the .45 but it was secure. I got out locking the doors as I went. I didn't delay in walking across the empty street, climbing the stairs with no railings, and then pushing the doorbell button.

A tall heavily-built, middle-aged man answers the door. I spoke through the screen door, introducing myself and telling him that I'd come to discuss their son's death in Vietnam. The man opened the door and I entered, walking by him. The hall opened up into a living room area. I stepped through the big opening and saw the man's wife sitting on a sofa behind a low coffee table. The big man passed me and then sat down next to his wife. Without being invited I eased into a big overstuffed chair angled opposite them. They said nothing. They offered nothing. I thought that a bit strange but decided to do what I had come to do, tell them the truth that no Marine Corps telegram would ever get close to.

I began with the time leading up to the final night, but I got no further. After only a few minutes of my recitation, the big man got up, walked around the coffee table, and then to stand in front of me, only a few feet away.

"You son-of-a-bitch," the man hissed out. "As sure as we are sitting here you killed our boy. You murdering bastard."

I just looked up at the man's angry agonized face in wonder and shock.

He then leaned forward and down, grabbing me by both upper arms in a very powerful grip. He jerked

me upward. I stood. He then dragged me, almost literally toward the front door, which he kicked open when we got there. No words were spoken again. He took my body and seemed to lift me bodily into the air, before tossing me quite literally through the air. I landed on the grass down at the bottom of the stairs, seeming to almost be absorbed by it as my full-frontal torso landed flat and hard. I heard the door at the top of the stairs slam with a resounding crash.

I fought for breaths until they came. I then fought to breathe in and out deeply as many times as I could, before trying to move. I knew there had been damage, as I felt the warmth of blood against the skin of my chest. My mind could not take in what had happened. I humorously thought about the fact that I'd worn my greens instead of my blues or whites. At least the grass stains wouldn't show, as we didn't have the money to have the uniform cleaned.

I crawled on my hands and knees down the slight decline of the lawn, until I got to the low brick wall at the bottom, sectioning the lawn off from the sidewalk on the other side. I carefully and gently pulled myself erect, staring across the street where the GTO was parked.

"I can do it," I whispered to myself, taking first one small step and then another.

There was no traffic or I might not have made it. Once behind the wheel of the car I knew I had to start it and get away from where I was. The 389 cranked up on the first turn of the key, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't look over at the house I'd been thrown

out of, instead concentrated on getting away to a safe place. The GTO idled around the corner and up a slight grade. I pulled to the curb, once again, this time to attempt to get myself together.

I realized, leaning into the steering wheel, shaken by the calculated. but never prepared for, intermittent shaking of the entire vehicle due to the installation of the high lift cam, that what had happened wasn't something I was capable of understanding or dealing with. I would have to tell my wife, and soon. She would know what I'd done so very wrong and what I might do to fix it.

I got the GTO underway and headed for the Richmond Bridge. I glanced down at the newspaper covering the .45. I knew in my heart of hearts, however, that I would rather shoot myself than either of my radio operator's parents. Colonel Lightning Bolt was another issue entirely.

I drove slowly, the mental pain I was suffering much more significant than the fact that my chest incision hurt like hell. I worked to maintain control and to try not to think about the visit to Fessman's parents. I approached the island from the east side, paying the toll for the bridge that I was going to stop short of using until my business was done. Upon reaching the parking lot to the lighthouse I shut the GTO's engine down. The beating of the eight-cylinder engine stopped but only after resisting for a few seconds. I wondered if I was a bit like the engine. Was I trying to shut down but the forces of the universe would not let me?

I reached over and folded the newspaper around the Colt. There was no way to get the weapon inside my uniform, and no way for me to get out of any of the uniform alone. I packed the weapon under my right arm, as if I was delivering a late newspaper, and then began the long walk down to the office part of the lighthouse.

The corporal and the buck sergeant were there as if no time or actions had passed during the rather tumultuous days before.

Both the corporal and the sergeant came to a position of attention as I entered the office.

"Stand at ease," I ordered, wondering about the formality of their reaction. "Is he in?" I asked, shifting the weight of the Colt from under my arm to let the package rest in my right hand down my side.

"Junior," he said. "He said you were not who you claimed, but were this other officer."

I noted that both the corporal and the buck sergeant could not keep their eyes from flitting down to the newspaper package I carried in my right hand.

"Well?" I asked, my voice going down so low that it to be hard to hear the word come out.

"He's gone, sir," the buck sergeant said. "He's transferred. We're all transferred. The orders came in hours ago. This office is being combined with the Southern section."

"So, where is he right now?" I asked, realizing that my dual missions for the day were both going down in flames.

“He’s got orders, like I said,” the buck sergeant replied.

“To where?” I asked, not having much faith in being told what I was being told.

“The corporal and I would be honored sir, Junior, to drive you home. The corporal would give one of his eye teeth to drive that GTO and I’m only too happy to follow on my motorcycle to bring him back.

“Okay, I’ll agree to that, but only if you tell me where he’s being transferred.

“Okay, sir, it’s a deal. He’s being transferred to Camp Pendleton,” the buck sergeant said.

“Well, I’ll be,” was all I could think to reply.

Was it a bad day, sir?” the corporal asked.

I thought about the question, unable to put the different incidents together in order to come to some valid conclusion. After a few seconds of silence, it came to me.

“Hell no, it was a great day. I’m E Stock Eliminator in the Half Moon Bay Winternationals.”

## Chapter XXII

It was hard to imagine, much less witness, that everything my wife, daughter and I owned could be fit into the interior spaces of a 1966 GTO. Nothing was attached or tied on the outside. I'd been raised in a Coast Guard family where the frequent moves were paid for by the government. It almost always took a completely full moving truck to move our family of two adults and three children. It turned out, as I surveyed the packing job from next to the car, that the single largest possession we currently possessed was Julie's crib, which came apart in three pieces or we couldn't have taken it with us on the move. The front driver's side of the GTO still had the three-point racing safety belt system Mickey installed, but Julie had nothing to hold her in so I constructed a plywood box to set in just back from the split front seats. She sat, seemingly happy as a tick, inside her low-walled box filled with blankets.

Our route would pass Rockaway Beach, the beach I'd spent every free moment I had running and walking up and down, trying to make my left hip work better. There didn't seem to be much hope of getting employment if I couldn't walk right, not once the Marine Corps was done with me, a result that had to be imminent. We stopped at the Thunderbird, the restaurant motel that sat right in the middle of the beach, the restaurant's deck stretched out over the rocks and sand. We'd never been able to eat at the



restaurant as we couldn't afford it, but we loved wandering around the place every once and a while. I pulled into the parking lot that ran almost the length of the beach. '*All I have to do is dream*' was playing on the radio. "*When I feel blue, in the night, and I need you to hold me tight, whenever I want you all I have to do is dream...*". The lyrics resounded back and forth in my head. I wasn't thinking of my wife when I listened to the song's words. I was thinking about life itself. I was trying to make life mine but, like in the song, I was dreaming my life away more than living it. I wanted to be in action. I had wanted to drive the GTO in the race, help prepare it, and then work somewhere other than a gas station where I barely pumped gas, exchanging my minimal services for some small amounts of cash. Now the station was gone and I was headed back toward the Marine Corps, an amazing organization but also one that only seemed to have things for me to do that were not worth doing at all, and those under a kind of supervision that the word 'draconian' didn't seem extreme enough to cover.

There was no time to walk or run the beach, as much as my crippled passage could be considered running. Our budget for the move only included, with the hundred dollars Mickey had given me, the day trip down the Pacific Coast Highway, paying for gas and a bit of food. That budget let out eating at the Thunderbird. I'd decided to wear my class "A" greens, with a khaki long-sleeve shirt, green trousers, and highly spit-shined shoes. I'd used the formal blouse

only if the weather caused me to wear it. Although the general public was not very sympathetic to the Marine Corps in general, I'd come to experience a good deal of help, care, and concern that emanated from minor elements of it.

Mary had taken Julie inside the restaurant to use the bathroom facilities, while I stood outside, leaning back against the hood of the GTO, not unlike Danny Ongais using the car as a prop for his 'oh so cool' image. I hadn't smoked since the few occasions I'd done so with the Gunny in the A Shau and I didn't intend to take it up now that I was back home. That meant I couldn't appear as totally 'with it' as Mickey and Danny had. A small group of older men emptied out of a sedan that was parked nearby.

"Where you headed Marine?" one of them asked; all four stopping on the narrow sidewalk that ran along the edge of the parking lot.

"Camp Pendleton, sir," I replied, straightening up to a position nearly that of attention.

"Probably going to make the trip in one straight shot, I'll bet," the man said. All three of his friends laughed at that.

"Yes, sir," I replied, my expression remaining deadpan, as I didn't get the joke.

"The Marine Corps never did pay well," the man went on, his friends smiling but no longer laughing.

Mary came out of the restaurant, Julie riding on her right hip, and walked to my side, both their bright smiles radiating out over all of us.

I introduced my wife and daughter to the men, but in reality, I just wanted to end communications, get in the car and get out of there.

“We’d be proud to buy you lunch,” the man said. “Anything you want, and you can even pack something to go for later on.”

I started to thank him and refuse his offer, but I got nowhere.

“That’s really nice of you,” Mary replied before I could get my reply out. “Come on, maybe we can get a window view,” she continued, turning to me before walking away with the four men toward the entrance, Julie looking over her shoulder at me with something of an expression of surprise.

Following lunch and packing away two boxes of fried chicken, I made my way over to the corner table where the four men were sitting and talking.

“Thank you,” I began, but got no farther.

“We were all on Guadalcanal,” the man who’d first spoken outside said. “You wear the ribbons. You earned the medals behind them. You’re now home and they aren’t going to mean very much, sad to say, except to some of us.”

I tried to speak again, but couldn’t think of what to say. Guadalcanal was a giant legend in the Corps, and all four of the men in front of me had been there and survived. They were like me, I realized, but knew I didn’t have to and shouldn’t say.

“You’re now a man among men,” the man said, “but you’re different, and you’ve got one helluva wife. Don’t screw it up.” The man finished, and then all four

of them started to laugh gently as if there had been some joke told that I was once more unable to comprehend.

We loaded into the GTO and began the ride down toward Southern California, stopping at ARCO gas stations frequently because they were the only chain that would accept Sears credit cards. Bathroom stops came with the gasoline refills and burgers and fries at Burger Chefs were the fare, once we'd polished off the packed away cold chicken. McDonald's was cheaper than Burger Chef but my wife wouldn't eat their burgers, claiming that the meat was not real meat at all. I didn't complain, although the meat in MacDonald's products, at least to me, tasted better than most other meat I ate. If it wasn't meat then all the better.

The GTO made the long trip better than I thought because of a performance mechanic who pumped our gas at one of the first filling stations along the way. He marveled at the engine when he checked the oil, and then went just about nuts when I told him that Mickey Thompson built it. Not exactly the whole truth but I figured it wouldn't hurt, and I just knew Mickey wouldn't care if he somehow got wind of my exaggeration.

"Man," the mechanic marveled, working the mechanical link between the three carburetors with his fingers, "this thing must be a boat out there on the highway. It's not built for that. Why don't you disconnect two carbs and run on one deuce, unless you're looking to drag somebody?"

“How much would it cost?” I asked, thinking about what credit I had remaining on the Sears card, and also wondering how it was that I had no idea that the engine was even capable of running on one carburetor. Camp Pendleton was still a long way off and I was unsure whether we’d make it financially, without having to stay over at some cheap motel along the way. Julie took a lot of time and care from both Mary or me, but her way of dealing with a long car trip made it easier as, primarily, she hunkered down in her makeshift crib in the back seat and slept or sat up holding the boxes edges and gurgling away on her pacifier.

“No charge, Marine,” the mechanic said, looking up with a big smile. “My brother was a Marine over there, and this will take five minutes, calls for two short plastic tubes and unbending the four ends of two connecting clips. You can put the clips back on and take the tubes off when you feel like really hauling ass in this thing...

I mean, wherever you get to where you’re going.”

I stopped myself from asking the man whether his brother had made it back or not. If the brother was dead, then what could I possibly say? I chose to say nothing until the man was done working under the hood.

I thanked Hank when he was done. That was the name stitched to the right breast of his overalls. The man laughed at that and said the name wasn’t his. He’d inherited the uniform from the last guy who worked there.

'Hank didn't give me his real name, even though I waited. Finally, I gave him six precious one-dollar bills for eighteen gallons of regular gas. Danny Ongais had told me, before we left, that the motor would run on regular and not ping or pre-detonate on that grade, as long as I kept the revolutions below four thousand and didn't get on the gas too hard when I took off. 'Hank' gave me seventy-eight cents change, which I took and pocketed. Ethyl fuel, the gas that the GTO much preferred, wouldn't have left any change leftover at all, and over the course of our trip, that slight difference would add up if the car kept getting about six miles to the gallon.

As soon as I pulled out of the station, I realized that the entire personality of the car had changed. It no longer bounced so much when it ran at low speed or sat at idle. It didn't leap off from a dead stop either and therefore didn't require an immediate adjustment to the gas pedal to control it. It was almost like a regular stick shift automobile. I headed the car south on the freeway, which had a speed limit of sixty-five, although trying to keep up with California traffic meant going at least seventy-five. The GTO ate way too much gas at that speed, plus the noise of the engine running at five thousand rpm was too much to bear over a long period of time.

The GTO drove listlessly but just fine with only one carburetor running, although it labored a bit at anything over sixty. I exited the freeway where the turnoff sign said Modesto. We headed west toward the coast and Highway One. The speed limit along

most of that run, which would take us all the way down to Camp Pendleton itself, was fifty-five, but in most places, it wasn't even that. Below Modesto, we stopped again for fuel and a rest stop. I filled up; having kept track of the mileage we'd put on from Hank's station. Thirteen miles to the gallon. I smiled, silently thanking Hank. We'd make it with money to spare, I just knew, and we'd probably do even better once we stopped again and I could measure the use of another full tank on Pacific Coast Highway.

KRLA, an AM station out of Pasadena located at 1110 on our radio, played the best rock and roll I could find, and for most of our trip was the only station we could receive with any clarity. There were many announcers but the one I always waited for, between songs, was named Dick Biondi. He didn't have Brother John's deep resonating voice or the laid-back humor that had been so evident to me when I listened to Armed Forces Radio back in the Nam, but he was funny and always upbeat, especially about the songs he played. One of those songs played while I drove, Mary sleeping, curled into the corner of her passenger seat and the barely padded plastic covering the door.

"Here's one for you," Biondi said, his usual jocular tone dipping into seriousness, "Guy named Phil Phillips, not his real name, wrote and recorded only one song before disappearing forever. He said once that all he got was eight hundred dollars for his effort. The song went to number one in the U.S. and in Great Britain. It remains one of my favorites for certain. It'll be reproduced many times in the years

ahead although only Mercury records will make any money.”

The song played after a brief silence, a silence so long that I almost moved my right hand off the wheel to adjust the frequency knob on the radio.

*“Come with me my love, to the sea, the sea of love. I want to tell you how much I love you. Do you remember when we met? That’s the day I knew you were my pet. I want to tell you how much I love you...”*

The song played through. My hands gripped the wheel hard and I stared straight ahead like I was driving down a narrowed tunnel. Phil Phillip wasn’t singing. Tex was singing, like before the bridge incident that got him killed, although Tex had never done anything more than sing the lyrics under his breath when the song played down in the A Shau. The song ended and I brought myself instantly back, glancing over to make sure my wife was still sleeping.

We drove on into the waning light and then the night, my wife hated to drive the newly refurbished GTO, mostly because of the thirty-pound resistance of the clutch pedal. She was great at driving stick shift but only five feet tall so her feet never really contacted the pedals as solidly as she was willing to admit.

We drove on into the darkness, the sun setting off to our right as we moved. The going was slower than would have been the case using the freeway, but we got to see most of the communities along the California coastline. It was dawn when we ended up in San Clemente, the last community before the base of Camp Pendleton began. The huge property mass



of the base ran for another twenty-two miles down the coast to a place called Oceanside.

I found San Clemente in the early morning to be like a place one might find in an old Spanish movie, except siesta time was apparently in the early hours instead of mid-day. There was nothing going on, at all. I drove back and forth on the main road, El Camino Real, that ran through the center of the small town. I arrived back at the town center, at the intersection where the main feeder that might lead down toward the ocean was located. I realized that it was either drive further south again on El Camino Real, which is what the Pacific Coast Highway had turned into, or head towards the ocean. I turned down Del Mar, noting a crooked street sign as I took the turn, and then pulled into an empty parking stall only a few yards later. Parking wasn't a problem, as all the stalls up and down both sides of the street were empty. An elegant, tall and very Spanish-looking building stood before me as I got out of the GTO and stared across the street. The San Clemente Hotel, a white sign with black letters indicated the name of the building.

Under that professional sign, closer down to the open wrought iron gates of the place's entrance, was another sign. The sign that had caught my eye. "Special," it said, and then underneath; "8 dollars a night, tonight only, and then 10 dollars forever, payable weekly." The sign was handwritten, penned in black magic marker on white butcher paper. The sign was held up by massive amounts of regular

scotch tape as if masking or duct tape had been unavailable to whoever put it up. I turned, bent down, and looked over at my wife. She looked over and I pointed, before walking across the street with no people and no cars. It was an eerie feeling, looking up and down Del Mar, as I moved. The place was like a scene from an Outer Limits television show.

Once through the courtyard, very delicately and well maintained with flowers and plants I couldn't name, I climbed three steps covered with terracotta tile and walked slowly into the lobby of the place. The entire floor was covered in the same tiles. There was no one at the front desk counter, but there was a man sitting in an overstuffed chair in the middle of the room. He was holding up a coffee cup and looking straight at me.

"You looking to rent a room?" the man asked, his voice soft, cultured, and elegant to the point of being almost, but not quite, snobby.

I didn't know what to say. The man was wearing a tuxedo but with the bow tie untied and hanging. Both of his arms were bent, one with the coffee cup and the other because he was leaning his elbow on one of the chair's arms.

"The name's Piaget, like the world's finest watch," the man continued as if I'd replied, "and the rooms are all one-bedroom with a toilet, shower, and hotplate. Each has a television but the reception's lousy because of the mountains over there." He pointed weakly with the fingers of his left hand toward

where the freeway ran through the middle of the town running east and west.

“How many beds to a room? I asked, not being able to get the eight dollars a day rate out of my head. In a town like I was in, not far from the ocean, and in a place that was so neatly taken care of and decorated almost any rate would have to be over twenty dollars, which I’d established as the upper end of our budget, at least until I could get properly transferred into my new permanent duty station and get a paycheck. I could stay at any BOQ, or bachelor officer’s quarters on any base, but there was no place or provision for dependents in such quarters.

“Two doubles and no rollaway, and that’s the deal,” the man replied, taking a slow sip of his coffee.

“Eight dollars a night,” I said, wanting to confirm what the sign out front said.

“It’s twenty-nine-a night with three-night minimum and all of it upfront in cash,” the man went on, nodding slowly as if he’d just made up the numbers while we were sitting. “The town doesn’t much like Marines, especially those fresh back from the Nam.”

I stood, not saying anything. My mind working over what had transpired so far. How the man knew I was fresh back from the war I didn’t know. Could it have been my heavy green blouse for ease of travel and because the weather was fine with me in my long sleeve wool shirt?

“How’d you know I was over there?” I asked, delaying the conversation for a few seconds, while I

tried to think about how I might nail down the eight-dollar rate advertised out front.

"The blood," the man replied.

I looked down. The incision had bled through again. I bit my lip, thinking about how I'd been so excited by the eight-dollar offer I'd forgotten that I was going out in public and my green blouse was the perfect armor and cover for such contact. I stood straighter and the blood would take a lot longer to get through. For the drive, it was just too hot and uncomfortable to wear the Saran Wrap.

"Plus, you are hunched over," the man said, using his free hand to reach in and pull a pack of Marlboros from the right inner jacket of his tux. He tamped the pack.

"Marines walk around like there's a ramrod stuck completely up their assholes, and you're an officer to boot." He lit the cigarette and then smiled as he exhaled his first puff. It was a nice friendly smile and seeing it made me feel a bit better.

I needed to get out of the shirt and back off my feet but I couldn't relax without Mary and Jules being taken care of. I needed to get down, however, or I'd never recovered enough to get to the base when it opened up, check-in, and go to work getting the travel paycheck generated.

"Your sign out front says the rate is eight dollars a night," I said, pointing behind me toward the open double doors leading to the courtyard.

"That was last night, not tonight," the man replied, still smiling.

I didn't reply because I had no reply. If I had to pay our last thirty dollars, or so, for a room then I was in trouble, as all I had in my pocket for cash was the remainder of the hundred bucks Mickey had given me for 'walking around money,' as he'd termed it. The over four-hundred-mile trip down had taken almost all the cash I had. My pocket held about nine dollars, half of it in coin change.

"Alright, alright," the man named Piaget finally said. "I'll make good on the fact that I failed to tear the sign down this morning. I've got a helluva hangover. The nights around here can be quite lively, although it doesn't appear that way to you this morning. It will later."

I sighed silently in relief, but I had to nail down the details.

"I get paid travel money when I hit the base later today, but that's a check and I won't be able to cash it instantly, or anything."

I didn't tell the man that I had at least one night's rent in my pocket. We'd need something to drink and eat and most restaurants, like the gas stations on the way down, only took Diners cards, not my Sears lifesaver.

Any questions?" the man asked.

"I've never heard of a P.J. watch," I offered.

"That's not a question and it's P-i-a-g-e-t, not P.J.," the man replied, spelling his name out. "The room comes with breakfast thrown in, so I'll have a menu sent up after you get in. If you want, when you get your check, I'll cash it for you as the government,

not good for much, is sure as hell good about backing up its checks.”

“Why is it eight bucks a night?” I asked.

“Because I was drunk when I put up the sign,” Piaget replied.

“I’ll bet you own the place,” I stated, looking around to take in the beauty of the old-fashioned fixtures and ornately stitched oriental rug under my feet.

“My brother and I,” Piaget said, his tone matter-of-fact, like he was reporting the weather, before adding, “but he’s still in prison so it’s just me for a while.” He put his coffee cup on the small table next to his chair, got up slowly, still dangling the Marlboro from his lips, and walked toward the front desk counter.

“You can park anywhere out there on Del Mar. No limits and no meters, not yet anyway, although I’m sure they’re coming. We’re off-season since it’s May, but next month the rates will double. and the cops will stop letting anyone park overnight.”

“So, the rate will go up to sixteen dollars a night,” I said, smiling at my own small bit of a joke.

There was no reply, Piaget walking around the counter, pulling a key from one of the many hooks, almost all holding dangling keys, and held it out toward me. View of the ocean from the top floor, when the misty fogs blow out late in the morning.

“Bart’s Furniture operation is next door,” Piaget said, as I took the key.

I stared down at the oblong brass tag the key was attached to by a chrome-plated ring. Room 34. Edmond Dantes's cell number is from the Count of Monte Cristo. I wanted to shake my head in disbelief. Life could be so strangely mysterious.

"Bart works out later in the morning before business hours, with his windows open, as he lives upstairs. Careful, as he doesn't wear much when he does his exercises and I get complaints.

"What do you do with complaints like that?" I asked, wondering just how revealing Bart's workouts had to be in order to generate complaints from people occupying the rooms on that side of the building.

"Buy the complainer's breakfast," Piaget replied, with another of his mildly attractive smiles.

"But breakfast comes with the room," I said.

"They don't all know that right off the bat," Piaget replied. "Usually, I have an employee here, but it's too early for her, and she has memory issues, anyway."

I pocketed the key, turned, and headed back out to where I'd left Mary, Julie, and the GTO. I looked up and down the idyllic street, with the unseeable ocean down and beyond. I had to get down for a few hours, cleaned up, bandages changed, and then report in. I had no idea when I'd owe Piaget money or how much it would be, but the fact that the family was in and safe, while I prepared for 'battle' on Camp Pendleton, made all the difference in the world. I crossed the street, making the decision to let Mary discover Bart's proclivities for working out in the nude, or whatever, for herself.

## Chapter XXIII

The trip onto the base was quick and easy, although getting through the gate for the first time without having to travel ten more miles to Mainside to sit, qualify for, and get a base sticker, was a bit problematic. The two guards were suspicious of the car, which I had the registration for but had forgotten the USAA auto insurance packet back at the hotel. They motioned me to the far side of the tiny guard booth, but then everything changed when I got out.

“Holy hell, lieutenant, you okay?” the Corporal said, noting the fact that it had been difficult for me to extricate myself from the seat and stand upright.

“Now those are some ribbons,” the Private First Class with him exclaimed, before going on, “you must be just back from the Nam. I only got this one shitty little ribbon that everyone else has.” He pointed at his own left breast.

“They’re going to give you some trouble here about you being just a second lieutenant and having all those decorations,” the Corporal stated. “Better bring your auto insurance papers and stuff to back up the medals too, because they’ll never give you a permanent sticker without it. Here’s a temporary to get you by for the first week, and here are your orders back.”

The corporal wrote on a large yellow and orange piece of stiff paper, before handing the document to me. I glanced at the driver’s side hood briefly, where



he'd put the paper down to do his writing and signing, but let it go. The body of the GTO had been good but after being acid-dipped by Thompson to get rid of weight, the paint they'd sprayed back on was many times better quality than had ever come from the factory. The GTO had been blue but now it was a very deep shiny blue, and I loved it almost as much as my wife hated it.

"Speed limit's twenty miles per hour on the whole base, which is big so it can be a bother, but the MP's are everywhere so hold the reins on that beast as best you can."

The Corporal handed my registration back and then carefully got into the front seat of the car took the placard I was holding and placed the temporary pass tipped up on the very center of the dashboard, resting in the main center heating vent.

The Corporal got out of the car, leaving the door hanging open. Both men then stood side by side and saluted me.

I crisply saluted back, wanting to thank them but knowing it was better if I just got into the GTO and left. They were good Marines doing a good job. As I drove away, carefully maintaining the ridiculous twenty-mile per hour speed limit, I wondered at the fact that there had been no other cars entering or leaving the base while I was stopped. It was late morning and I would have thought there would be more regular traffic in and out of the gate. I figured that I had a lot to learn about Camp Pendleton.

I drove the GTO slowly in second gear for a few miles, mad at myself for not having asked directions to my reporting-in unit, which was the second battalion of the thirteenth Marines. Amazingly, the first turn-off to the left I came to had a big sign with an arrow. The sign gave the battalion colors and had a big 2/13 painted in red across it.

The drive up to the headquarters building was short, the parking lot nearly empty, but with each space having printed titles. Only four vehicles were present, none of the spaces occupied that had the letters; C.O., X.O., and 1st Sgt printed across the top of them. I pulled the GTO into a space that was reserved for some warrant officer named Smyth. There were no handicapped places, no visitor parking, and not even a fire curb or lane. I grabbed my hastily written orders, stepped out of the GTO with some difficulty, but thankfully with no one there to see me. The double doors that opened into a hall reminded me of Hawaii, in that they were screen doors. I guessed that the building wasn't air-conditioned like almost nothing was in Hawaii either.

I removed my cover and then stepped inside. The first office I encountered along the right side of the hall had a closed-door with a rectangular glass inset. The glass was the kind you couldn't see through. The title on the glass, in cursive black paint very well done, said Colonel William Fennessey, and under the name; Commanding Officer. I knocked several times lightly, and then, following the code of entering a superior officer's office, I stepped in. If the

commander was in and didn't want company I would have been shouted at prior to my entry.

A corporal sat behind the C.O.'s desk.

"Can I help you?" he asked, looking up from some paperwork.

"We're not in combat," I replied, my voice flat, my expression the same.

"Ah no," the corporal replied.

"So, we're in a training command stateside on the United States Marine Corps base of Camp Pendleton," I went on, with the same deadening flatness in my tone.

The corporal didn't respond, only his hands, which had been fiddling with paperwork, were all of a sudden frozen in mid-air. I stared into his eyes.

"Do you need me to order you to come to a position of attention and address me as sir, or might you want to do that on your own?" I asked, my voice now softer, making it more difficult for the corporal to hear me.

"I'm the Colonel's aide sir, sorry sir," the corporal responded, standing and coming to the position of attention.

"Colonel's, even regimental commanders, do not rate an aide, and if you were a real aide you'd be wearing an aide's badge to denote such. What are you doing in here and where in hell am I supposed to report in to?"

"The Colonel isn't a normal commanding officer, sir," the corporal replied. "Trust me when I say you'll

like him. He's having lunch at the O'Club with the other officers.

You can go to the club, although I doubt you'll want to report in there, or you can wait here until he and Major Stewart, our XO, get back."

"Stand at ease," I ordered, "and where can I wait?" My GTO had no air-conditioner and even in May, the bright Southern California sun was heating everything up that was outside under its bright glare. There was also the not so apparent fact that my wife had wrapped me up again in the Saran, and that would make the heat in the car totally unbearable.

The corporal came around the Colonel's desk and headed around me for the door, making sure we made no contact as he went by. I noted that the Colonel's desk was the usual Marine Corps duty metal affair with a crummy marked-up rubber top. Maybe I really was going to like the guy.

The Corporal led me down the hall to an opening that had no door. It turned out to be the coffee/break room. A ratty couch and many regulation chairs lined the walls of the relatively small space. The coffee pot was full, centered on top of a small corner table, and the red light was on, indicating that the coffee was hot. I walked over to it, noting that the ceramic cups were nearly exactly like the parking places out front. They all had the same names painted on them in black.

"A cup?" I asked the corporal, as he made to leave back through the door.

“Under the table, the double doors, sir,” he replied, pointing. “Coffee’s yesterday’s though because nobody drinks it after early morning hours, and not many at that.”

“Shocking,” I whispered to myself. Shocking that nobody wanted to drink day-old reheated coffee. I waited until the corporal was gone, and then very carefully lowered my mostly erect torso down so I could get the door panels open. There was only one stack of Styrofoam cups. I sighed. I felt like taking the coffee cup of the same guy whose parking place my GTO occupied, but I thought better of it. I’d already terrified one corporal at my new command and I didn’t need any more potential trouble.

I poured a cup of the likely terrible coffee, putting four spoons of the Coffee-Mate cream into it, and three big dollops of sugar.

I got slowly to my feet, straightened my back as best I could, and moved to sit in one of the chairs. I could only imagine how long it would take to work my way out of the couch if I sat in that deep-cushioned thing.

The coffee wasn’t as bad as I thought. I sipped and thought. My first entry into the rear area Marine Corps at Treasure Island hadn’t gone well. My hospital stay at Oakland Naval Hospital had been about the same. I wondered what it might be. I wondered the Marine Corps changed so much while I was gone that I could find no commonality with almost any of the men serving in military positions back home? Or, had I changed?

I drank my coffee slowly down and then got another cup. I realized that I was more patient than I had been prior to my going overseas. I attributed it to not really giving much of a damn about most things that might once have interested me.

I loved my wife and daughter, liked the GTO, and I missed Mickey Thompson and Danny Ongais and what they'd done for us, but backward and forward from that was mostly a blank. A passing canvas of unremarkable work that was of the past and the present but the 'painting' on the canvas not seeming to have much of a depth of emotional quality to it. I thought about the corporal serving as 'aide' to the Colonel. I hadn't been angry with him. I'd been cold, and in a way, I was uncomfortable with, deadly. I also knew that I had nearly instantly turned him into some sort of threat and then reacted to the threat mentally in a way the poor corporal could, and never would, understand. I promised myself that I'd get better. I heard the whole crew of the Headquarters command structure returning. They talked, laughed, and drifted down the hall.

"Who the hell's in my parking spot?" said a deep male voice rising above the rest. "Where in hell am I supposed to park?" the voice continued.

There was no answer to the man's question that I could hear, as I stepped out into the hallway and made my way back to Colonel Fennessey's office. The door gaped open. I walked through the congregated but moving mass of returning officers. It wasn't hard, as my cover was folded under my belt

and all I carried was the folded sheath of papers that were my orders. Some of the officers looked at me fairly closely but nobody said anything.

I knocked on the door jam that was part of the commanding officer's door.

"Enter," a voice said.

I stepped in and walked up to the C.O.'s desk, noting something I hadn't noticed before. The desk sat atop a raised platform. The platform was only about six inches high but it assured that anyone occupying the two chairs in front of it would have to look up to see across the top of the desk properly. Another desk was situated in the left corner of the room. A big man with silver hair sat at the desk in front of me. I did not make any move to sit in one of the chairs, stepping carefully between them. The Colonel was a full bird colonel, polished silver eagles perfectly mounted on both parts of his collar. The other man at the other desk was a major, whom I presumed to be the X.O., although it seemed odd that he'd be at a desk in the C.O.'s office when his own office was right next door.

"Reporting for duty," I said, formally, coming to the position of attention. I didn't salute. Marines do not salute inside buildings, unlike Army soldiers, unless they are wearing a cover because they are underarms. I pushed the thin folded set of papers across his desk after he ordered me to stand at ease.

The colonel looked at me strangely, but accepted the papers, unfolded them, and began to read.

“Travel pay,” he said, flicking his eyes up for a few seconds. “You don’t get that here. You have to go to Mainside, check with Personnel and they’ll give you cash unless you want a check.” The Colonel stopped talking and read on.

“You were an artillery forward observer attached to 2/11 over there, it says here,” the colonel noted, still reading.

I said nothing. There was nothing to say I realized. I didn’t have a believable combat record and I knew it. I had been a company commander of Marines in combat, two of them in fact, but my actions would likely never be written anywhere. It was useless to tell the story. I waited.

“Forward observer’s a dangerous job in combat,” the Colonel finally said, putting the papers down in front of him. “What else did you do?”

I remained silent, trying to think up a good believable lie.

“You didn’t get that chest full of medals being a regular forward observer, not in my experience.”

I glanced back and forth between Major Stewart and the Colonel. Neither man was wearing Vietnam campaign ribbons. The Colonel sounded okay but in truth, I knew I was dealing with two FNGs.

“You don’t seem to stand too straight,” the Colonel observed after some time had gone by and I’d been unable to find a proper answer to his previous question.



“Yes, sir,” I replied. “The central incision from my surgeries is healing from the inside outward. If I stand too straight, then the bleeding gets worse.”

“What’d you do, run into one of your own guns in the middle of the night?” Major Stewart asked, his voice laced with sarcasm.

“He’s got the purple heart,” the Colonel said, putting some anger into his tone, “and he’s wearing five decorations for combat valor, which is five more than you have and he’s been a Marine for only just short of seventeen months, not your ten years.”

I didn’t look over at the major but I felt his gaze, a gaze of acid hate, I didn’t have to see to know was there. Other Marines, those who hadn’t seen real combat and didn’t have combat decorations for valor, mostly resented those who wore them. That much I’d picked up in the hospital and at Treasure Island. I hadn’t made an enemy for life out of Major Stewart. The Colonel had made him that for me.

“The bleeding gets worse, you said,” the Colonel stated as if catching the phrase only in review.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, wondering where he was going with his question.

“So, you’re bleeding right now?” Fennessy asked, his eyebrows going up.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, surprised by the surprise evident in his voice. “My wife wraps me in Saran Wrap so it doesn’t leak out, although I have to change bandages every chance I get, and she’s not always around.”

“Unbutton your blouse,” the Colonel ordered. I unbuttoned one button after another of my tight outer coat, the coat that held me together so well. I didn’t want to unbutton them all, however, because I might not be able to get one started in a loop again without outside help.

“Open it,” the Colonel asked, his voice becoming hushed as he bent forward and stared.

“Jesus Christ,” he suddenly yelled, coming to a standing position behind his desk. “Stewart, call the hospital, have them send an ambulance, and get some corpsmen in right now. I don’t need this guy to die right here in front of me in my office.”

I bottomed up my blouse while the Major, the Colonel, his corporal ‘aide’, and others conferred about my condition. I noted that none of them was paying much attention to me. I retrieved my orders from the Colonel’s desk. I wasn’t due to report into the command, by order, for six more days. I had shown up early to get a travel check. The most important thing the Colonel had said, that impacted heavily on me, was that I could get cash for the travel at Mainside.

I turned and walked out of the Colonel’s office, down the hall, out the double doors, and then made it to Smyth’s parking spot and got into the GTO. Mercifully, the car started on the first revolution of the new engine. I didn’t know where Mainside was but I’d somehow find it. Nobody had come out of the Headquarters office behind me. I turned right at the bottom of the road that led up the regiment and

headed back toward the guards at the Las Pulgas gate. They'd been more understanding and helpful than anyone I'd met so far, and I knew they'd know where Mainside was and how best to get there.

I smiled as I drove. I had no address and no telephone number. I was free as a bird until I had to report back, and that reporting could take care of itself. Only one thing bothered me. Would either Stewart or Fennessey remember about the travel money? I'd made no point of being truly interested and the Colonel had only mentioned it offhand. The last thing I needed was to be encountered at personnel and forced to return to the 2/13 command structure. I knew that eventually I'd have to serve time there but the whole experience so far was best described by the parking lot. I had no place there. Could I somehow force myself to fit into the kind of creature they would find acceptable to work with?

Once the Marines at the gate turned me around to head back into the interior of Camp Pendleton, I drove by the turn-off to 2/13 and kept going. Mainside was ahead not more than eight to ten miles and I had the directions down.

I laughed out loud as I drove. What would a couple of corpsmen have said or done if they'd showed up in time to catch me? Take me to the hospital where the dirty surgery staff there, if they even had such a team, would tell them that I just needed to rest and recuperate...although the Marines Corps wasn't quite up to wanting to provide that part of it? I'd have a week to get myself healed as best I

could and in shape enough to at least perform a desk job for a full seven-hour day, given that back in the rear there was always an extended one-hour lunch for officers.

When I found the personnel office I was a bit put off. The long low building reminded me so much of the personnel office in Da Nang. It was much larger, however. I went inside and walked up to the counter, expecting trouble but not knowing what kind. And then I was surprised. The young civilian lady at the counter wanted my poorly written set of orders, my I.D. card, and whether I had reported in to my command. Although I had nothing to prove that I'd formally reported in to 2/13, I simply acknowledge the reporting I'd done and also told her that Colonel Fennessy had insisted that I get to personnel and get cash before the day was out.

"He's quite the wonderful man, you know," she smiled. "He'll be Commandant if there's any justice in the universe."

I didn't want to tell her that there really was almost no justice in the universe, at least my universe, so I simply cloned her smile and nodded my head.

"Yes," I added, "He seems like he'll be a great commanding officer."

"Base housing for officers is full," the woman said, processing paperwork but not showing any of it to me. "That means you'll have to live off base. I'll advance the first off base housing allowance to you but it's to be taken out of your next paycheck in one lump sum."

“Fine,” I replied, having no idea when my next paycheck would be or how much it would be for. I was out of the hospital so the forty-four dollars a month combat pay would be gone. I did know that.

The woman left and I waited for ten nervous minutes for her return. I waited in silent worry. Had anybody from the regiment called about me?

When she came back she handed me a thick envelope, my orders, and I.D. card back.

“Welcome aboard,” she whispered, “and thanks and welcome home too.”

I walked out to the GTO, reflecting on the simple fact that the woman’s sincere welcome and thanks were the most genuine I’d gotten from anyone outside of my wife and the guys who’d bought us lunch at the Thunderbird Restaurant at Rockaway Beach days before since I’d returned.

I left the base as quickly as I could, not wanting to take even the slightest of chances that I might run into one of the officers from 2/13. The run from Pulgas gate back to the hotel in San Clemente took mere minutes, once I got through the gate. There were no procedures for exiting the base, which made me feel easier. The GTO was half empty of gas, and I’d been about nowhere in distance. I knew that car had to go, as much as I loved it, as I couldn’t afford to have it eat up so much of my income. I regretfully parted with five dollars from my cash stash, and paid the attendant at the Esso station, vowing to trade in the special automobile, which wasn’t just any old car but a key part of my returning home from the war.

I pulled into an open parking stall outside the hotel on Del Mar. I took the envelope off the seat and counted the cash. Eight hundred ten dollars and 75 cents. It was more cash than I had ever held in one amount since I could remember. I had to get a bank account but before doing that I needed to change my bandages and get some more rest. I sat in the car, almost too tired to get out and move into the hotel lobby. Relief was building inside me. We'd be able to afford an apartment in San Clemente, a nearly idyllic small Spanish town that was almost totally unmilitary, at least in appearance. That it was snuggled right up against the northern side of the Marine base might have effects that I could not easily see, I also understood.

My wife was ecstatic. After carefully cutting me out of my Saran Wrap coating, I lay on the sofa, careful not to bleed on anything, as I pulled off old 4X4s and put new ones on. The regular surgical tape would hold them sufficiently well as long as I didn't exert myself overmuch. I was surprised at my wife. She wasn't nearly as excited by the sum of money, giving us survival and some good bit of freedom, as she was in finding out that I was going to trade in the GTO. I'd underestimated her hatred for the car, I realized.

"What are they going to do when they can't find you at the command or the base?" Mary asked as I tried to nod off for a bit.

"I don't know," I replied, not really caring. "They'll figure it out I presume. One of them, probably that

nasty character named Stewart, or maybe the fake aide, will call personnel.”

“You didn’t technically report in, though,” my wife said, still worried.

“Read the orders,” I replied. The paperwork’s over on the kitchen counter. The orders say that I have to report in next week. This time I’ve been given is recuperative time and I’m taking all of it.”

“Well, you did get the money, and you are selling the car,” she continued, as my eyes started to close.

“You got the money,” I replied, “it’s right there in your hand, and I’ll take care of the GTO. What kind of car do you want?”

But my eyes finally closed and I didn’t hear her reply.

## Chapter XXIV

Piaget, the man who owned, with his prisoner brother, the San Clemente Hotel, was a font of information and assistance, although arcane in attire, language usage, and personal style.

“Do you have a first name?” was one of the first things I asked him when we got a chance to sit down and talk about my wife, Julie, and I finding a more permanent place to live in the community.

“I don’t use it,” was all he said.

When I queried him on where he’d come from all he would say was “Montecito,” which I knew to be a small township outside of Santa Barbara but that was it. He gave me no details about anything personal, but he did give me the name of a set of apartment multiplex units only one block away on Cabrillo Avenue. A guy named Stedman owned the units and Piaget assured me we could get in with one month’s rent and a hundred-dollar security deposit. Blocks from the main beach, close enough to walk to the very center of town; the description of the place seemed ideal. It would take half the money we had but it would give us a permanent residence not that far from where I was going to be working at Camp Pendleton. Piaget had called the man right from his office and we could go right over and check it out.

When I got back to the room I was immediately filled in about the ‘Bart guy’ living above his furniture store and working out in questionable attire visible



through the upper window of his place. Mary was not offended herself but complained on behalf of all the other women who might be staying in rooms that faced the furniture store's sidewall. I changed the subject by mentioning the potential of our getting a new apartment only a block away.

The walk to the apartment's location was shorter than I thought, as the back of the hotel jutted right up to a parking lot that faced out on Cabrillo. Mary carried Julie, as my hip wouldn't properly support her extra weight for any distance.

Mr. Stedman, a gaunt older gentleman, met us at the steps up into the structure. The apartment for rent was the third and last one back. It took only moments to see that it was perfect. The unit included two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a washer, and dryer plus a small patio in the back that was fenced in for Julie to play.

Mr. Stedman filled out the lease in front of us on the only piece of furniture left in the apartment by the former tenant. One ratty table and two equally ratty chairs. However, that was one more table and two more chairs than we owned, so I hoped Stedman would include them in the deal, but I didn't make any comment about them. Furniture was going to be a problem I would have to consider before we moved in, so I asked for the lease to be effective on the first of June, which was five days away.

"You can move in right away, regardless of the date on the lease, if you want to do a little cleanup,"

Stedman said, signing the short document as he said the words.

“Cleaning crews are almost impossible to find at a reasonable cost here.”

I took out my envelope of cash and counted out four hundred dollars. I knew I didn’t have anywhere near enough money to furnish the place so I was thinking in terms of a bed, some lights, and possibly a used couch to set against the wall in the living room.

“Cash,” Stedman intoned, holding the wad of money in his left hand like he was going to put it up to the light to see if the bills were any good. “Pay by check when you get an account here, so you can prove you’d paid every month. I’m getting old and sometimes forget. You’re a Marine. My son was a Marine, but don’t get the idea that that means you can be late on the rent.” He handed me two keys to the only door the place had, other than the sliding glass one to the patio. “Water, electricity, and gas are covered by the lease, but you’re on your own for telephone service.”

I determined to spend part of our money to purchase civilian clothing that had no identifiers of any kind on it. My haircut couldn’t be modified, and that gave me away no matter what. In spite of that, I wanted as little identification with the military as I could get when I wasn’t actually on the base or traveling to or from it. The war had changed everything and in only a very few years. When I’d gone into the Corps the war had been acceptable, if not popular, everywhere, but only two years later

America's participation in it wasn't popular at all, not even with most other Marines.

We walked back to the hotel, my wife smiling all the way and talking to Julie while she walked. I limped along, understanding that getting a place of our own, even a small apartment, was having a home, as opposed to staying in a hotel. We would be able to cook again, do the laundry, and have a real-life if I could figure out the furniture problem, buy a phone, and get phone service.

Once back at the hotel I decided to go next door and attempt to deal with Bart Abrate, the window show guy. In truth, I knew I was brush-blocking aside some of the very necessary chores I had to do. I didn't want to eat up any more of our money by staying in the hotel, although Piaget hadn't asked for even the first night's payment yet. My paycheck coming into the regiment at the base would have money deducted from it now, as well as quite possibly not be there at all if the paperwork hadn't transferred. Orders of transfer had little to do with payroll in the Marine Corps, other than that dealing with combat pay or allotments (of which I had a large one to the Navy Credit Union coming out monthly to pay for the required tailoring of my uniforms), and geography. Payday in OCS, and then at the Basic School in Quantico had been in cash, paid out from a card table set up inside the barracks. The Marine Corps was changing fast, however, and with the changing times, cash was becoming less and less important.

I walked out of the San Clemente Hotel lobby, through the small courtyard, and onto Del Mar Avenue where the GTO remained parked and waiting. The street was fairly deserted, although not empty, as it usually was in the early morning or later evening hours. I moved down the sidewalk, passing the empty lot that sat between the hotel and the furniture store. I stopped in front of the two big windows of the store that were filled with beautiful furniture and other decorator items. I had to admit that the store owner, Mr. Bart Abrate, his name emblazoned across the top of both windows, had good taste.

The store was open, so I walked through the single glass-paned French window-style door. There was a counter but nobody was behind it, in fact, there was nobody else in the store at all that I could see. The counter was bare, except for a cash register and a ridiculously large bell button on its polished surface. A small sign next to the button read “push for service.” I pushed the button but nothing happened. I pushed again.

“Hold your horses, I’m coming,” a voice yelled from a distance.

I looked around. I guessed that the voice had come from a stairwell that ended not far from the counter. I waited.

A figure seemed to spring from the bottom of the well, turning as he exited. He stopped just beyond the end of the counter ‘landing’ right next to me.

I pulled back a bit, instinctively. The man was attired in more of a costume than a set of regular

clothing. His jacket was made of some expensive cashmere but adorned with pins of all kinds, and he wore a small-cap, like the beanies Freshman at St. Norberts had worn when I was new to that college.

“Well, well, well”, the short man said, a great smile plastered across his face, “What interest might the United States Marine Corps have in entering my august abode?”

I was taken aback even more, to the point where I moved a few feet further from him, realizing that although I knew what the words ‘august abode’ meant I’d never heard them spoken before, much less to me.

“We need to talk,” I finally got out, knowing I sounded like some sort of idiot but not being able to help it.

“Well then,” Mr. Abrate, purred out, “Then we must repair to my quarters in order to enjoy complete privacy.”

He turned and headed up the steps he’d rushed down only seconds before.

I sighed, and then, having no choice, followed him. The stairs were steep, and the climb was difficult on my left hip. Once at the top I stepped through a heavy wood door and entered the man’s quarters, as he’d termed them. I stopped and looked around. Mr. Abrate had somehow disappeared inside the giant single room, not decorated at all like the man’s showroom downstairs. There was a desk in one far corner next to a big open window with two hard-backed chairs in front of it. There was a bed, more chairs, and a small table located about the area in the

opposing corner. Other than oriental rugs strewn about, and a big rubber exercise pad next to the window that faced the hotel, there was almost nothing more.

"I'm Bart Abrate, the owner," a voice said, as the door closed behind me.

I realized Abrate had been waiting behind the door for me to enter. Unaccountably, he swung the door around and then locked the deadbolt before moving to the desk. Once there he seated himself and then canted back in the swivel to the point where, although I couldn't see his legs, it seemed like his feet had to be dangling off the floor.

"You limp, have a Purple Heart and are a Marine Officer, no doubt serving at Camp Pendleton," Abrate intoned as if he was reading the words off of some list or chart.

"Yes, sir," I replied standing before the desk.

"What is it, before I make my request?" Abrate asked.

"Request?" I blurted out, but Abrate didn't go on, just continuing to smile up at me as his chair slowly bobbed up and down.

"I'm here to talk to you about the display you've been putting on every day when you work out naked before that window over there," I said, growing ever more uncomfortable playing out the role I'd somehow allowed to be assigned to me. "My wife sees that from our room. Women don't find it pleasing to see the naked bodies of men they don't know."

“That’s funny,” Abrate suddenly replied, laughing out loud. “I don’t care what women might think. I’m gay.”

I turned my head to look at the door I’d just come through, then back into Abrate’s smiling eyes, and then over to the open window against the nearby wall.

“Probably about a twenty-two-foot distance, or so, from the edge of that window down to the ground,” I said, my words coming out slow and low as I turned my attention back to looking into the Bart Abrate’s eyes. Eyes that instantly stopped smiling.

“I’d unlock that door if I was in your current position,” I followed up since Abrate didn’t seem like he was going to say anything.

Abrate leaped from the chair, causing it to swing back and forth before it slowly moved in small circles behind him as he made his way quickly to the door. He unlocked the deadbolt.

“See,” he said, heading back for his chair, “it wasn’t locked on the inside. I meant no harm or disrespect.”

“You’ve got to cover the window when you work out or there’s going to be trouble,” I replied, ignoring whatever it was that might have motivated Abrate to act so strangely. “And I need some furniture. We’ve got a brand-new apartment on Cabrillo and all we’ve got is a table and two chairs.”

I didn’t like telling the man our problems when I’d just chastised him for the nude workout thing.

"I presume there's more than your wife?" Abrate asked, his voice changing to one of straight business as if I'd never brought up the other issue.

"My infant daughter, although we have a crib for her," I said.

"Cabrillo," Abrate murmured, "that's just across the street from the back of my place. Where on Cabrillo?"

"Less than half a block down toward the ocean," I replied, wondering where the strange man's mind was going.

"Let's take a look," Abrate said, getting up and coming around the desk. "Nobody here at this hour anyway."

I was amazed that the man made no effort to lock his store up at all. We walked out the back, through a small empty parking lot, and over to the apartment complex. I didn't realize until we were almost at the door that the keys to the place were back in our room at the hotel.

"No problem," Abrate said, walking up to the chest-high fence surrounding the back patio, vaulting the thing in a single steadied leap, and disappearing from my view. I was left standing near the front door. Seconds later the door opened. I was surprised again.

"Sliding glass door," Abrate said. "You lift up, then pull out, and voila!"

"You've been in the furniture business for a while, I assume," I said dryly, stepping inside and closing the door behind me.



Abrate walked through the first floor without saying a word, then went to the stairs leading up to the two bedrooms and disappeared. I stayed where I was, figuring I would have nothing to add to whatever the man was looking for.

A minute later Abrate reappeared.

"Okay, let's go," he said, opening the door and stepping out onto the narrow sidewalk.

"What do we do now?" I asked, mystified, trying to quickly lock the door, close it and catch up with Abrate, who was almost at the stairs leading down to the street. I rushed, since I still couldn't run, to catch up with him.

"We do nothing," Abrate said, putting extra stress on the word 'we,' before heading back toward the rear of his shop. "You go get your wife, send her over to me, and watch the baby. This isn't your kind of work."

"I can't afford your furniture," I said uncomfortably. It was hard having to tell just about everyone that we had no real money.

"You didn't ask what I was requesting when you walked into my office," Abrate shot back, opening his back door with one hand while turning to face me. I frowned, shook my head, and waited.

"I want to be your guest at the O'Club on base," he said. I've been on the base but never gotten into the club. I love Marines and I want to circulate among the officers."

"I'll bet you do," I said, not being able to keep myself from commenting.

"Well?" Abrate asked. "You do your part, maybe get me into the club every once and a while, and I get you furniture for fifty bucks a month. You can work the fifty off by clerking in the store when you're not playing at being a Marine. Your limp won't hurt a thing. I have people to move stuff and do the hauling."

"How much furniture are we talking about?" I asked, not liking the sound of anything about the deal, especially the part where I got sent home to watch the baby while my wife made key decisions about our new life.

"Beds, nightstands, couch, chairs, real kitchen table, bar stools for the bar, outdoor patio stuff, and some decorator items," Abrate said.

"What would you pay an hour, not that I'm sure I can work for anybody while I'm still in the Corps?" I asked, finding the whole arrangement strange but if it meant we could move into the apartment soon it would be worth putting up with.

"Five bucks an hour plus three percent of whatever gets sold when you're on," Abrate said, counting the issues he was discussing by sticking a finger out for each on the hand that wasn't still on the back doorknob. "I cover the offending window, and you come through with the visits to the Officer's Club. That's four parts to the deal."

"I'll talk it over with my wife," I replied.

"Take your time, as long as it's less than an hour," Abrate said but laughed when he said it.

Abrate went inside and I walked back to the front entrance to the hotel.

Piaget was in the lobby when I came through the entrance, sitting in his usual place, a glass of wine in his left hand and a cigarette extending out from a holder in his right. He looked like he was a lost English aristocrat somehow come to be stuck in a run-down palace far from the halls of England, although he didn't sound English at all.

"We got the apartment and I can't thank you enough," I said, holding out my right hand for a few seconds until I realized he had no place to put either the cigarette or the wine without appearing to slip from his formal role. I put my hand down, as he smiled one of his genuine friendly smiles. He took a deep inhalation from the cigarette, and then followed that by sipping some wine. I was about to sit down when he looked beyond me toward the big double doors that led into the small courtyard near the street, and his smile faded.

"You have company," he said, jutting his chin toward the doors ever so slightly.

I turned to see a Marine officer walking into the lobby. He was a First Lieutenant and properly attired in Class "C" greens, which meant he was wearing the short sleeves shirt instead of my own long sleeves. Camp Pendleton, as I'd learned, was a Class "C" base, due to its 'tropical' location in Southern California.

The officer walked straight toward us and I noted that he wore a mustache that wasn't real long on the ends but those ends were formed into neat little points. He took his cover off and held it in his hand.

“Joseph Beard, at your service,” he said with a great grin on his face.

“And...” Piaget replied, not going on.

“And I’m here for this man, as he’s probably guessed by now.”

My mind raced. How could anybody on the base know where I was. I’d told no one where we were staying, not even the pay clerk at Mainside. I wanted my week of recuperation but it looked for all the world that that wasn’t going to happen.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Can we talk outside for a second?” he replied, before nodding to Piaget and going on, “no offense...”

“None was taken,” Piaget replied, rising to his feet quickly, removing the cigarette from his mouth, and being careful not to spill his glass of wine. “I’ve got a bit of business in the back so you can stay right here. Nobody around at this hour.”

Both Joseph Beard and I waited. I examined his ribbons, which showed that he’d served in-country, but there were no indications, such as combat decorations, that he’d done anything but that. I noted that he wore the Explosive Ordinance Disposal gold badge which was so uncommon that it was the first I’d seen on a living Marine. It was larger than it appeared in the literature I’d read. I wondered what a man wearing the ‘crab,’ as the strange device was called, had been doing in Vietnam.

“You from the regiment?” I asked, knowing he had to be. I was dying to know how he’d found me but I wasn’t going to ask.

“No, I’m from San Onofre, the nuclear plant there, but Colonel Fennessey is a great officer and friend. He mentioned that they were looking for you.”

I waited, not knowing what to say. Looking for me for what? I was nobody. I was a Second Lieutenant serving at the very bottom of a disability chart while awaiting a hearing before a medical board.

“The GTO,” Beard said, pointing back out to the street. “I drive a Camaro Super Sport, which sure as hell would give that thing a run. I saw it on Del Mar. I live in San Clemente where the Colonel said that you’d no doubt take up residence. He loves your car, so you weren’t hard to find.”

I was amazed. It would have been hard to find for most people, but not for this man.

“Okay, so you found me,” I said with no enthusiasm in the tone of my words at all. “What, exactly does Colonel Fennessey want?”

“I came to apologize on his behalf,” the lieutenant said formally, standing at what was close to the position of attention. “You were treated badly when you reported in.

The Colonel wants to make that up to you.”

I was more than surprised. I was shocked. “The Colonel is apologizing to me?” I said, not quite believing Beard’s comments.

“He’s appointed you Executive Officer of Headquarters Battery, serving under Captain Johns, a fabulous guy who’s coming to the end of his service,” Beard said with a smile. “Play your cards right and

you'll have your own command, no matter what comes after that."

I realized once again that neither Beard nor anyone else, apparently, had a record of my performance while I'd been in the A Shau, and the more I thought about it the more I liked that idea. Becoming Junior near the end of my stay at Oaknoll Naval Hospital hadn't done me a bit of good. I'd already been a commander of Marines, and, in fact, had been nothing else while I'd been in-country, but nobody back in the states needed to know that.

"When do I have to report?" I asked.

"After your recuperation, of course," Beard replied, smiling this time. "I told you that Fennessey's a great Marine, but maybe you'll have to find that out for yourself."

I was instantly relieved. I had high hopes of being able to take a week off and maybe not have to show up wearing Saran Wrap, limping along, or any of that. A week wasn't much but it seemed like a lifetime to me.

"What do you do at San Onofre?" I asked, liking the lieutenant more and more.

"Classified," Beard replied. "I graduated from Caltech with a degree in nuclear research. I had no idea that the Marine Corps might want anybody with that kind of background, but I was wrong."

"Maybe we can get together sometime here since the town's pretty small," I offered.

"It's a city, technically," Beard replied. "Sure, I'll tell my wife. You find a place yet?"

I looked into Beard's eyes and didn't reply.

"Classified," he said, laughing openly. "I won't tell a soul, certainly nobody with the regiment you're assigned to."

"Cabrillo, a block from where we stand," I said, deciding I had to trust somebody other than my wife. "Little apartment. Just got it."

"Okay, I'll find you again, just leave the GTO in the driveway or on the street," he laughed, before going on. "Does this mean that when I report back this afternoon that you are accepting the Colonel's apology? If you accept then you're expected to have a social lunch with the Colonel and regimental staff at the O'Club at noon tomorrow."

I was surprised again. Like what was the Colonel going to do if I said no? High Noon. I thought of the Gary Cooper movie. "*Do not forsake me oh my darling, not on this our wedding day...*" played through my mind. I was long married so the lyrics didn't apply, but the feelings sure did. Everything I was running into back in the 'world of the round eyes,' as we'd called it down in the A Shau, seemed so high threat in so many ways. And then, like a bolt of light, an idea came to me.

"It's a deal," I said to Lieutenant Beard, wondering if I'd ever see him again once he was done being the messenger pigeon for Colonel Fennessey. For some reason, Beard saluted me, even though we were both inside and uncovered, but he smiled with the salute.

Beard did an about-face and walked out through the wide-open front doors of the lobby. I waited a few seconds, and then followed.

Beard's Camaro SS rumbled and then roared smoothly, as Beard got the car going. It was a convertible, beautiful with the top down, but convertibles were about four hundred pounds heavier than sedans in the GM line. My GTO was a sedan but the weight alone wouldn't make the real devastating difference if the two vehicles we owned ever sat side by side to drag race. Mickey Thompson would be the difference.

I didn't need to talk to my wife. The deal Abrate was offering, in spite of his sexual orientation, was a gift from God, and there was no sense not taking it. I walked the short distance down Del Mar and into his store, once again. This time he was behind the counter. He looked up.

I took my cover off, tucked it under my left arm, and stuck my right hand across the top of the counter. "You've got a deal," I said, "and I hope you're free to have lunch at the O'Club tomorrow.

We shook, he smiled, and I left the way I'd come, replacing the 'piss cutter' hat back on my head as I walked out.

"Hey," Abrate yelled from behind me.

I stopped and turned to face him.

"What time is the lunch?" he asked.

"High noon," I said, trying to keep a smile from appearing on my face.



