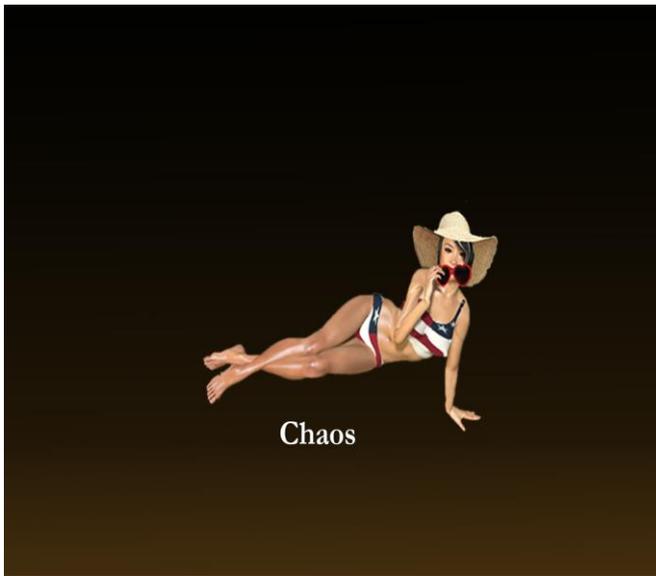


Chaos

Spring, 1967 CE. Rafaela Barardi, trained in medicine to become an ER doctor, instead goes to Vietnam as an army nurse to find her cousin, an Army Green Beret. He is on a confidential mission and out of contact with his headquarters. Rafaela fears he may be missing in action somewhere in the highlands near the DMZ. Meanwhile, Aleck Morris, a reporter for a Midwestern magazine, gets approval to cover the conflict from within "the shit." When he winds up in a military hospital, he soon becomes involved in his nurse's mission to find her cousin, no matter what.

==== RAFAELA



I was kind of a tough kid growing up on my family's farm in northern Ohio. For me, according to my parents, the terrible twos were more like the terrible ones, twos, and threes. As an infant I didn't mind screaming at the top of my lungs especially if I thought my parents were watching. As I grew older, particularly when I tried to speak in sentences, my frustration seemed to grow exponentially with each failed attempt at making my wishes known by simply speaking them. On more than one occasion my folks thought something was wrong with me. They planned to take me to a doctor, but that would have required an expedition to get to a city large enough to support a doctor who might know

something about my problem ...if there was a problem.

The work on the farm, particularly milking cows twice each day every day year-round, usually trumped the kind of planning and dreaming necessary to take trips of any kind, never mind trips for important business like children's health.

My parents, Marie and Angelo Barardi, are descendants of a family that emigrated from Italy in the late 1800s following the consolidation of Italy's northern and southern provinces. Unlike many of the Italian immigrants of that time the Barardis chose to settle inland on small farms miles away from the ports in the bigger cities.

I grew up the eldest of three children. Though noisy as an infant and toddler I mostly kept to myself as I grew older. I had learned how to curb my expressiveness, not so much because of the irritation it caused others, but because I was growing more self-confident about my understanding of the world and the people in it. I began to realize that few of the people around me had answers to the questions I wanted to ask.

In school some of my classmates made the mistake of thinking I was a little slow. I worked hard, and I studied hard. I was a voracious reader. At home I was a full participant in the work of our three-hundred-acre farm, where the primary cash crops were corn, wheat, soybeans, and clover. Growing required a lot of shoveling and a lot of farm equipment that could not break down when it was needed most. From an early age I took pride in my ability and knowledge of tools to help keep the equipment in good working order.

Chaos

There were cows and goats for milk, a couple of pigs for meat, and chickens for eggs on the farm. There was the usual complement of dogs and cats running around; there was a single swaybacked horse for us to ride and learn to take care of. I took a particular interest in the good health, good feeding, and good care of all of the animals.

But I had resolved early in high school that I would find a way to escape the small farm town life of northern Ohio. I knew my problem: I had read too many books of too many different kinds on too many different subjects.

When I think of this time in my life, I am reminded of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In an aside to Marc Antony, Julius Caesar speaks of one of the conspirators: "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much! Such men are dangerous." The line resonates constantly in the back of my mind.

My cousin, another Barardi family offspring named Rafael, also felt the early need for escape and adventure. We are nearly the same age, and we were very close growing up, more like brother and sister than like cousins. During family gatherings we often left the adults and younger children to find more interesting adventures. Eventually some of the adults would notice our disappearance. There would be momentary panic as they went looking for us, and great relief once we were found. Once found there were always hugs and kisses for the two of us errant children. Occasionally, punishment would come later for once again causing so much fear and consternation among the gathered friends and family.

One early incident in particular raised concerns about us to a very high level. It was Easter Sunday. After attending church our families had gathered to eat and reconnect with family and friends who had traveled from New York City to celebrate with their rural Ohio relatives.

The house was surrounded by woods. We had not yet sat down for dinner when the cry rang out: "Where is Rafaela?"

My father, Angelo, looked toward his brother, Rafael's father, Fabio, his concern barely hidden.

It was Rafael who later found me, hiding in the hayloft in the barn.

Rafael resolved to join the army as soon as he turned seventeen. Our fathers were both disappointed that Rafael wanted to leave the farm. They felt he was a strong, intelligent, and practical boy who would be a great asset to the whole community if only he could be persuaded to stay. Even worse in the mind of my father, Rafael kept badgering me to start applying to medical school instead of talking about it all the time.

In spring 1960 Rafael turned seventeen. He had already advised his draft board that he would sign up as soon as he came of age so long as he could pick his service and military occupational specialty (MOS). He wanted to be an airborne Ranger, and he wanted to do basic training at Fort Ord, California. His draft board approved the request.

My high school class of twelve students had graduated in the spring of 1959. I had earned straight As all through high school. I was class valedictorian, though I declined the opportunity to make a graduation speech.

Rafael and I had been discussing plans to travel together to California. There I would take some summer classes prior to entering the University of California at Berkeley for premed studies in the fall. We were eager to get on the road as soon as possible.

ALECK

My magazine, *The Prairie Observer*, sent me into Vietnam a few months ago to get what you might call “local color” on the war. The magazine and staff like me do not see ourselves as “muckrakers,” nor are we particularly biased politically, though we do try to see that deserving workers get a fair deal from the businesses that earn a profit off of their work. The thing is that we love writing. We love the process of journalism when it comes to finding people who know something about some difficult aspect of our assigned topic. We know how to arrange interviews and ask the questions that might uncover a story of interest to a wider audience.

The pay is crap and the work intense and never-ending, but we can’t think of anything better, or more fun, to do with our time in these days. Besides, the managing editor usually lets us follow our noses in finding new stories and in working those stories once assigned.

Best of all, the prettiest of the editorial assistants, Penny Blue, is, like me, a graduate in English from the University of Minnesota. She seems to enjoy my take on my reporting assignments. Penny’s editorial re-writes of my work also help keep me clear, mostly, of problems with the editorial policies of the magazine’s financiers and senior managers.

So far as we know from the national news, government spokesmen, and wire-service chatter, the communists based in the north Vietnamese city of Hanoi are trying to take over the legitimate government of the south based in Saigon. The most consistent policy line out of the White House of Lyndon B. Johnson has always been, up till now, that the North Vietnamese Armies (the NVA) are mostly rice farmers who would not be able to sustain their war missions in the face of a response by the well-equipped and well-trained US military.

In late October 1965, the battle for the Ia Drang Valley, some two hundred miles out in the boonies north of Saigon, changed all that. The policy line has not changed all that much, but the four-day battle caused some high-level people stateside to wake up to the difficulty of winning this war. My magazine decided to try to get ahead of it so they could cash in on contacts and local knowledge as the war expanded.

We had been doing wire service “rip-and-read” news with press releases from Washington’s official spokesmen on war matters. We figured it was time to become more relevant, and we wanted to know more. We realized that we were missing the real news of the conflict.

So, they sent me over to check it out. They did not send me so much because of my extraordinary talent. I am still pretty green on the job. I think I do have enough talent to keep my facts straight, and I have the skills and experience necessary to write a simple sentence. I also have an interest in the history being built in this remote country. I even wrote a paper on it for my senior thesis that the magazine’s editors considered “insightful.”

Realistically, though, my assignment probably happened because I am single and free of possible complications for the magazine if something happens to me down there in the deep, deep jungle boondocks.

The conflict in the Ia Drang Valley brought four days of intense battle by one thousand US Army regulars, draftees, and specialized combat units using new, helicopter-based airmobile tactics against about twenty-five hundred ground-bound NVA troops. Even without air-mobile assets, the NVA proved themselves to be highly skilled, dedicated, well organized, and well equipped.

After Ia Drang all the earlier happy talk in the US media of an army of disorganized peasants and rice farmers began to shift away from this blind naivete. The NVA — though “defeated” in the Ia Drang, according to the news — has shown itself to be a more capable and dedicated military force than the North Koreans had been 15 years before.

Chaos

There is some irony here. Like the north Vietnamese the North Koreans were a peasant army, but they had the full support of regular Chinese army troops and equipment with them on the field of battle. By contrast the Vietnamese have been in a battle of independence from the Chinese for more than a thousand years. The south Vietnamese are siding with the US military and fought alongside us in the Ia Drang. The NVA, on the other hand, is relying entirely on their own manpower and equipment.

Speaking now from the safety of hindsight I believe some of the US military planners who planned the confrontation in the Ia Drang probably now wish they had paid more attention to the thousand-year history of Vietnam's war of independence from China.

There will be a lot of American casualties, a lot of politically unpleasant consequences, and a lot of bad press coverage. Whether found to be good or bad, I had resolved to make my mark on history by contributing my full share to the news coverage.

Because of the Ia Drang, the sudden calls for an expanded draft grew louder by the early spring of 1966. My draft number was high enough that I stood very little chance of getting called. By the time I graduated from college in May, I had decided that I was not going to volunteer for military service. I was not much interested in spending a couple of years being ordered to shoot people or being ordered to get shot at.

On the other hand, I am not a pacifist and had no intention of going to Canada.

The worst thing about military service, for me, was the idea that I might get shot at, hit, and crippled for life. If it happens while I'm on assignment over here, I know I will feel even worse — very angry, actually — if my crippling is the result of decisions by people who start sending all our bombs, bullets, napalm, and armor plate to make war on people who live in mud huts and tin shacks, who make their roofs out of tree branches and palm leaves, and who catch their food with nets they make by hand out of twigs and vines.

Even with these troubling thoughts I still felt pulled by the romance and adventure of war. As terrible as we can imagine war to be, it still appeals to the imagination of younger guys like me who are filled more with the raging testosterone of youth than with the reluctance and caution of maturity and responsibility.

Following my editor's instructions on what I should do when I arrived in Saigon, I spent the early weeks of my tour sitting at the rooftop bar of the Continental Hotel getting "acclimated." That meant sitting around listening to the same correspondents get drunk every night and talk about their time "in the shit." This got pretty tiresome. The more I listened to them, the more I became convinced that the loudest talkers had never been anywhere near the shit.

In early '67, Saigon was a long way from any combat "shit," though there were plenty of kids on scooters selling, or stealing, everything that a drunken, stupid, or horny GI might want to buy, carry, or sleep with. The shit was in the streets of Saigon as far as I was concerned. Eventually, I decided to take my correspondent's credentials and find a way out into the boonies to check out some of the real action.

I did have one interesting encounter with an Inuit GI from, I think he said, Point Hope, Alaska. He said he was a swift boat driver down in the Mekong Delta. He was up here in the big city for some R&R. He had a short, stocky body and almond-shaped eyes in his round face.

"My people eat a lot of muktuk," he told me. "Muktuk is a chunk of the skin of a humpback whale with a bunch of fat attached. The muktuk plus a lot of seal oil and caribou meat gives us Eskimos a lot of body fat so we can survive the winter." He fanned himself then. "So it's goddamn hot for me here in the jungle. A couple of my buds grew up on the North Slope of Alaska. We were all in basic at Ord together. They couldn't take the heat and the army sent 'em home. I'm still here, but it is fuckin' hot,

man. Maybe I'll be lucky and get sent home. That would be great because I miss my girl Mary. I need to see her soon."

We got to know each other a bit. He was quick to laugh at my jokes and I at his. At one point he took out a small, beaded pouch of reindeer hide. There was a thumb-sized blue/violet stone inside. The stone was beautiful. When I asked what it was, he said he got it a few years ago before he got drafted from some scientist working at the mouth of a creek south of Point Hope. They were preparing for some kind of atomic explosion.

"He said that the explosion was going to make it possible for us to someday have green grass around our houses for our pigs and chickens." He broke into a big belly laugh at this idea. "Pigs and chickens, he said. I laughed my ass off. I tried to tell him we didn't have any pigs or chickens; we have muktuk, seal meat, and blueberries and quail eggs in the summertime. He didn't know what I was talking about, so he gave me this stone as some kind of booty prize. I am keeping it for my girlfriend, Mary, while she is at school in Fairbanks."

Then I remembered that I did know something about the stone. The Tiffany Company in New York had somehow gotten hold of the marketing rights to the class of gemstone that my Eskimo friend was showing me. I told him the stone was probably worth a lot of money and that I would buy it from him if he was interested in selling.

He said he was not, so we parted ways a short while later when I saw one of my correspondent buddies off in a corner of the bar. "I've enjoyed talking with you," I told him. "I hope we can meet up again sometime. You have me wanting to try a piece of muktuk."

"Come on up to Point Hope, man. If I can survive this shithole business for another six months, I'll be heading straight back up. I gotta give this stone to my girl Mary."

When I joined my correspondent friend Jeb in the corner of the bar, he was straight up with me. He told me that if I really wanted to see some action, I needed to hop a supply flight up to Da Nang or Hue near the DMZ, then hook a ride on a supply chopper to the combat base at Khe Sanh. "Get to know some grunts and have them take you out on a 'Lurp' patrol. Get the commanding officer's permission to go along by taking his picture and promising to get it published back in his hometown paper."

"You better make sure you really want to do this. You can get your ass blown off up there, and you won't even know what hit you." After another swallow of beer, he said, "I mean it about losing your ass. You might wake up in a hospital with half your body gone, and the rest barely functional. Are you ready for that?"

"I can handle it," I said, as if I had any idea what "it" was, "...but what the hell is a Lurp patrol?" He looked askance for a moment then decided he would give me a straight answer, rather than some smart-ass response to what I learned, later, was a pretty dumb question. So far as most correspondents who had been in the shit were concerned, everybody in the world knows what a Lurp is, but I did not.

"Lurp is short, basically, for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol," Jeb told me. "Lurps can be as large as a platoon of maybe fifty guys led by a lieutenant or captain, or as small as a squad of seven guys led by a sergeant, or even the squad leader; an enlisted man of lower rank like corporal. It depends on the mission — the distance, the objective, the need to bring along technical specialists and their equipment, the likelihood of enemy contact. Stuff like that determines the manpower and firepower on a Lurp.

"Understand that a Lurp is the essence of infantry in war. If you want to understand war on the ground, you have to go on a Lurp; especially one that has contact with the enemy. Maybe you will be lucky and not get hurt and maybe you won't do something really stupid that gets some other dumb grunt on your patrol hurt or killed.

Chaos

It is about 450 crow-fly miles north from the main Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon to the port and supply base at Da Nang, but our "Herc" supply ship had to fly a secure route because of increasing numbers of NVA ground units reportedly operating in south Vietnam. The several abrupt changes in direction to avoid ground fire made the two-hour flight closer to three hours.

Once on the ground and shut down, the Herc pilot took me to the ops shack on the runway. From Da Nang it's a hundred-mile flight to the combat base near the village of Khe San in the highlands close to the DMZ. The base is about seven miles east of the Laotian border along the east-west highway named Route 9. According to the pilot the Ho Chi Minh Trail runs north and south. It kind of threads itself inside and outside the Lao border.

"You can just about throw a rock to the west at the Lao border and hit the trail," he said. "Westmoreland figures if he can dump enough bombs on the trail, he can disrupt the NVA arms shipments into the south. He has his head up his ass on that, but what else is new?"

In the ops shack I got lucky. The Herc pilot introduced me to the pilot of a supply chopper. After hearing my pitch, the chopper pilot looked at me with a quizzical look, but he said I could ride along to the combat base if I didn't mind sitting on ammo boxes and C rations.

The pilot called the C rations "c-rats." That is the name the grunts have given them because, if they were to be eaten with any kind of pleasure, you had to think like a rat while eating. It all made sense to me.

The combat base was originally established as a Special Forces airfield in August 1962. The base represented the start of President Kennedy's military reengagement with the north Vietnamese enemy in Indochina following the departure of the French in 1954. Kennedy's immediate purpose was to provide support for President Ngo Dinh Diem and the government of south Vietnam in Saigon. As the NVA began to infiltrate south Vietnam, Kennedy's military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor, recommended that General Paul D. Harkins take overall command of US military operations.

President Diem was a member of a very prominent family in the minority population of Catholics left over from the French occupation that ended with the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. He had spent the summer of 1963 carrying out a program of brutal suppression of the country's majority Buddhists. There was so much hostility growing against Diem and his family that he and his brother were assassinated by his own military on November 2, 1963. Some believe that US officials met with several unhappy officers in Diem's government in late October and had not discouraged the idea of an assassination.

Even earlier, the self-immolation by Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc at a busy Saigon intersection on June 11, 1963, and the graphic imagery that accompanied the global news coverage after the event, began to convince many in the population and among US diplomats that Diem had to be removed from office by whatever means necessary.

By the time of the Kennedy assassination on November 22, there were sixteen thousand "advisors" on the ground in Vietnam, including those at Khe San. Rumor has it that Kennedy never planned a full commitment of combat troops to Vietnam, and that he was planning to withdraw all troops as soon as it became politically feasible.

Now, in the late summer 1967, the main pro south Vietnam guy around is General Westmoreland. He was appointed by former Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson after Johnson took over the president's office. Whatever Kennedy had intended for America's military commitment to the war, there was very little talk of withdrawal in early 1964.

By the time of the battle in the Ia Drang Valley, our government officials were openly discussing a

military buildup in the south to protect the south Vietnamese government from NVA movements south of the DMZ.

After those fierce four days of battle, Westmoreland decided that bases in the area around Khe San would be a critical part of his plan to cut off the transport of war materials from the north to the south to supply the infiltrating NVA armies. He wanted a large contingent of Marines at the Khe San base to begin what he hoped to be the destruction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The head of the Marines in Vietnam at this writing is one General Lewis Walt. According to military scuttlebutt, Westmoreland and Walt had a major head-butting contest in the Pentagon over Westmoreland's strategy of committing massive forces to the Ho Chi Minh Trail near the DMZ. Walt was convinced that even if the trail could be severed, or NVA movements of armaments and troops slowed significantly, it would have little effect on the gathering strength of the NVA already in the south.

After all, Walt may well have argued, the Ia Drang Valley is already two hundred miles south of the DMZ, and the NVA was capable, even two years earlier, of fielding and supporting an army that could stop a full-scale US military operation using well-trained troops and advanced tactics and equipment.

Whatever the truth of it, Westmoreland, with Johnson's help won the argument over strategy, and Khe San, supplied out of Da Nang and staffed by Marines, has become a major focus of the US military buildup.

As the Marines moved in, the original occupants of the combat base, the army "advisors" known as Green Berets moved out to Lang Vei, about halfway to the Lao border. There, they continue to work with local Montagnard peasants (the "Nards") on training in US military tactics and reconnaissance methods. The Nards profess themselves to be politically aligned with the US interest in defeating the lowland north Vietnamese. They promise to help both US forces and the south Vietnamese army, the ARVN, in disrupting the movement of military supplies over the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In their assurances of loyalty, though, the highland Nards may have understated their historic conflict with the lowland Vietnamese, such as those who lived and governed in Saigon, a conflict that has continued at least since the Vietnamese people established their independence from China more than a thousand years before.

Shortly after leaving Da Nang, the chopper pilot's voice came over my headset. "You better hunker down and hang on back there. The NVA are sending up some," he paused, then, with a heavy French accent, said, "*fleurs du mal*. I'm going to have to jerk the airplane around a little bit in order to stay out of trouble."

The pilot began to do some gut-wrenching dips, turns, and stalls with an airplane never designed for such things. It crossed my mind that the pilot might be secretly French, and an enthusiast for Baudelaire. Two loud bangs on the tail of the chopper followed by some ugly vibrations broke my escapist reverie on the ethnic origins and literary preferences of chopper pilots.

The rattling and vibration got more intense, and the chopper started slewing from side to side. The pilot's urgent voice came over the headset. "They clipped us. My steering is a little fucked up, and I need to get her down on the deck. Check around your area and make sure you can see a way out of either side of the aircraft in case I fuck up and we go in hot. If there are any loose boxes back there that could fly loose and hurt somebody, throw 'em out now. We are about ten clicks out from the LZ at Khe San. I'll try to get somebody to help us out if the reception on the ground is too warm."

Chaos

We skidded around the sky for a few more minutes. I clung desperately to my seat belt, and to the side of the chopper, praying we wouldn't take any more hits. The pilot came on again. His voice sounded slow and gravelly this time, which led me to think he was wounded.

"Khe San is straight ahead," he said. "I can almost see the landing zone. You need to look around the horizon now to check for landmarks so you can walk out of here. My arm is fucked up, and I'm losing feeling in it. And I am getting dizzy. I'll put her down in the next clearing I see while I can still control our descent."

We flew on for another thirty seconds, then, suddenly, the chopper flipped ninety degrees to the horizon and started to drop down, nose first. I braced, but I figured that this was pretty much the end of it. At the last second the chopper flattened out, the pilot killed the engine, and we hit the ground hard. The landing struts collapsed. There were trees all around us, and the blades above us were winding down but still turning and slapping against some of the lower branches.

The pilot slumped forward against his straps. He didn't move.

I couldn't feel any broken bones, but I was sore as hell with bruises where I got banged into the chopper's metalwork and where one of the flying boxes clipped me. I unstrapped and crawled forward over the disarray behind the pilot's seat. A sharp pain shot through my left leg, and I let out a sharp yell. I knew my leg was not broken, but a corner of a box poked into it before flying out the door. I didn't notice until I put weight on it.

In response to my yell, the pilot seemed to rouse himself enough to point toward the first aid kit on the bulkhead. I crawled over, gritting my teeth and favoring my sore leg, then tried to find his wound. His lower right arm was a bloody mess; he couldn't move it, and his flight jacket was shredded. His face looked pale. I have no experience with first aid beyond Boy Scouts and summer camp, but I figured I needed to stop his bleeding before I did anything else.

So, I grabbed a large roll of bandage out of the kit and wrapped it several times around the pilot's upper arm, sort of like a tourniquet. By stopping the bleeding, I figured I would have time to try and help him get out of the chopper and onto the ground before he passed out again. Then I could try to find out how badly he was wounded, and what more there was that I needed to do to help him.

I didn't see any smoke or smell any fuel, so chances were good that there wouldn't be a fire. That was a major piece of luck, but I figured I needed to get moving right now.

Once I got him out and laying on some camo material on the ground, I checked his arm. The bleeding seemed to have slowed a lot, so I loosened the tourniquet and reset it more carefully in the hopes that I could quickly figure out if the bleeding was arterial.

I needed to decide what the hell I should do next. *Jesus Christ*, I thought. *Two nights ago, I was sitting in a warm and friendly bar having a beer and conversation. Now I am in the middle of the goddamn jungle in hostile territory trying to help a wounded soldier whose pure flying skill just saved my life.* Now it was my job to save his. I didn't agree to this when I signed on to come to Vietnam in the middle of a goddamn war.

I asked the pilot how he was doing. He spoke not much above a whisper.

"Except for the pain in my arm, I'm okay for now, but there may be hostile NVA looking for us. There should be an M2 Carbine between the seats in the cockpit, and some of these ammo boxes should have ammo for it. Check around the cockpit for a .45-caliber sidearm. Get the carbine, find and load the ammo, and I'll teach you something about fire-fights and perimeter defense. I have my own sidearm, but I only have a couple of spare ammo clips. Check the boxes for .45-cal clips and bring me all that you can find. Call me Jack, by the way."

"I'm Aleck Morris. From upper Minnesota. Nice to meet you." I sounded stupid. I even reached for

his righthand to shake before checking myself. He smiled and reached up with his left. We shook.

Wow, I thought. *This guy has some balls.* I crawled into the back of the Huey to see what kind of ammo and other weaponry I could find. We lost a lot as Jack went through the gyrations to dodge ground fire, but there were two boxes of carbine ammo and a box of .45s. I also found the M2 and started moving the stuff over to where Jack could check it out and try to load the weapons while I continued to reconnoiter our situation and supplies.

Jack whispered hoarsely to me, "We could be here for a day or two. Check the chopper for all the C-rats you can find and bring that aid kit over. See if there is any water. If not, try to find something to catch rain water. I'm looking around for a place to hole up away from the chopper in case we start to get visitors."

I asked Jack if the radio in the chopper worked.

"Maybe, but it probably won't take our NVA friends very long to find us if we send a radio signal. We need to reserve that asset until we know for sure that it is our last resort if we are to keep from getting killed or taken captive."

What he said took my breath away. I had not even thought about being killed or captured. "Jesus Christ!" I said to myself again. This is real. This is as real as it gets.

Jack continued on. "I see what looks like a small rise about a hundred paces from here. If there is some kind of a hollow behind it, we need to move our stuff and ourselves over there. Take the .45, make sure it has a full clip, grab some spare clips then go check it out before you do anything else."

As I looked at the rise and considered the possibility of a hollow behind it, I started feeling hopeful that we could at least hold off a few of the enemy if they decided to attack. We could probably rest here long enough to regain the strength we would need to start moving toward our own forces around Khe San. With luck, the NVA wouldn't find us, or they would ignore us long enough for Jack and I to make our getaway.

When I got back Jack told me to start hauling the ammo and food over to our new hiding place.

"I'll stay by the chopper to cover you if any bad guys show up," he whispered. "Get moving. And don't lead the enemy to us by breaking a bunch of branches while you're moving this stuff. Step carefully and be thinking about how to either hide your tracks, or how to trick them into looking into places where we aren't. Once we move in over there, we won't be coming back to the chopper."

It would soon be dark, so it was time to stop talking and start moving our stuff.

It took a couple of hours to move everything, to help Jack move to our hiding spot, and to do what I could in the darkening twilight to wipe out any sign of our movements. Jack was going in and out of consciousness, and I realized that I was dead tired as well.

Later, I woke up to total darkness, but some stars were shining through the trees. Jack was still either unconscious or sleeping. His chest was rising and falling normally. I had the feeling somebody was watching me. As I looked around, I hear a soft whisper very close to me. I laid my rifle down next to me before falling asleep, but it was no longer there.

"I moved your rifle so you wouldn't accidentally shoot me," the whisperer said. "I'll give it back as soon as I'm sure you won't do anything stupid like shouting or thrashing around or trying to shoot me. Do I have your word that you won't do anything stupid?"

"Who the fuck are you?" I whispered back.

Chaos

"My name is Sergeant Mike Fredrickson from Brooklyn. Go Mets, Fuck the Yankees. I'm in this shithole of a place as a Green Beret. I saw your bird come down earlier today, but I didn't want to let you know until I had a better feel for whether or not Charlie was in the immediate neighborhood, and whether or not you guys knew how to get your shits squared away."

"So, what did you find out?"

"So far, so good, but it pays to never let your guard down in this part of the world. You're lucky your pilot got his bird as far as he could south and east of Khe San. Most of the enemy is west of here, more toward the border with Laos. The guys who shot up your bird, though, probably saw you go down without a fire. They are probably headed this way to see if there are any goodies they can use."

"Okay. I believe you." I sat up. "Can I have my rifle back? I'll try not to do anything stupid, but I have to warn you that I'm a journalist, not a soldier."

I still could not see the whisperer, but I now felt the returned rifle next to my hand.

"Yeah. I know that. You move like a pissed-off elephant at a rock concert. If I am going to get you and your buddy back to a safer area, I am going to have to give you some OJT on stealth when moving and staying the fuck out of sight when not. How is the pilot doing?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not a doctor or a medic either. He lost some blood. I put on a tourniquet, but he seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness before I fell asleep. He seems to be breathing okay now."

"Okay," the voice said. "Here's the deal. I work with one of the locals on these kinds of long-range patrols. I dress like a local and speak the language pretty well. I don't speak at all when I am in hostile company. My partner is a Hmong tribesman named Fres Thao. We don't carry noisy weapons on patrol, so I've sent him back to our base camp to see if he can round up some more help in case Charlie shows up. He's a fast runner, and I expect him back with a report before dawn. His report will tell us what our real chances for survival are."

"How far away is this help?" I asked.

"Probably five clicks to the Khe San combat base as the crow flies. Khe San is that way." The figure of the sergeant finally came into view. I saw him point a partially masked flashlight toward the ground in a direction that looked to me to be a little to the right of where I remembered the sun setting.

"Since the territory is likely hostile, that means it could take us two days to get there. Think about how to get prepared for a long, fast hike with your wounded pilot," he said. "I think you will be awake for a while, so I am going to take a nap. If Fres comes back before I wake up, I told him to wake me before announcing himself to you. I think your pilot will survive. He might need some morphine for pain, and some help from us, but he should be able to walk out of here. If you have any more questions keep them to yourself until I wake up."

Mike seemed to fade away like the Cheshire Cat. Other than his whisper, I still had no idea what Mike looked like: not his facial features, not the color of his hair or how it was cut, not his clothes or native dress, or whether he was wearing a hat, or had any weapons that make noise.

Even though it is the rainy season here, the sky was clear of clouds. After some time, I looked up to see if there were any constellations that I would recognize, that might guide me in a safe direction if the pilot and I had to walk out on our own. Polaris was too far north to be seen through trees from this low angle. I thought of the constellation of Cassiopeia, beautiful mother of the even more beautiful Andromeda, both punished by the ocean god Poseidon for their arrogance. Cassiopeia and her throne were upside down for half the night in the northern sky, across Polaris from the Big Dipper. In the southern sky, I was only familiar with the Belt of Orion and the Southern Cross. Neither was visible

through the trees.

RAFAELA

“Hey Matty, did I tell you that I’ll be headed to Vietnam in late summer?”

“Did you finish your military training?” asked Matty Franchetti, my friend from grade school. “Do you have time to earn some money first? Don’t you still have a lot of bills to pay after medical school?”

The Cedar Point season had barely begun, but the day was hot. We were sunning ourselves on the amusement park’s beach.

I had recently completed medical school with an emphasis in emergency medicine, but I had not yet signed up for a residency. Since high school, Matty had worked as a secretary and executive assistant at the New Departure ball bearing manufacturing plant south of town. Unlike me, Matty had not gone to college after high school. She had taken a series of business courses at a local extension of The Ohio State University, and she had done well in them. Her quick wit, native intelligence, her ability to work hard and learn new business and factory floor procedures had earned her a lot of praise from a succession of managers.

After high school, we had lost contact with each other while I moved to the east side of San Francisco Bay to attend the University of California at Berkeley. When I was accepted into the medical school at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, we reconnected.

While I have a flair for travel and adventure, Matty is an admitted homebody. Despite these differences we found few others in northern Ohio, male or female, that offered the same kind of human and personal understanding—essentially that we could stand being around for more than a few minutes at a time.

“Hey, Rafe. Do you want to go over to Put-in-Bay later?” Matty asked.

I had been looking beyond Lake Erie toward the distant horizon. “You know, Matt, there is a lot going on this summer out in the Bay Area around San Francisco. Some of it has to do with protests against Johnson’s escalation of the war, but there is a lot of fun stuff, too. I need some of that kind of mindless fun before I leave for Vietnam. Medical school was hard work, and my medical specialty in emergency medicine probably means I’ll have a lifetime of it.”

I adjusted the tie of my bathing suit and then turned to Matty. “I’m not even thinking about Vietnam yet. I hear enough about it on the news every day. I’m still wondering if I should have volunteered to go. Then I think about my younger cousin. Rafael is in a Special Forces unit. The family and I worry because we don’t hear from him, and the army won’t give us any details, only that he is on an extended confidential mission.”

“I get that,” Matty said. “So, let’s not talk about it. What’s going on in San Francisco?”

I smiled at the clear war within her between trying to make me feel better and hoping that she didn’t have to leave Ohio. “A lot of people are coming into the city as war protesters, and there are already a lot of hippies there. The radical fashions that you see around the Haight-Ashbury are exciting all by themselves. The more I think about it, the more I think I want to go back there for at least a few weeks. I just want to see it, because it is so radical, so offensive, and so out of sight that I can’t imagine that it will last very long.

“It wouldn’t even have come into being at all, except that it is San Francisco, one of the most beautiful cities on the planet. Want to go out there with me? You know, to kind of... check it out? Don’t you have a bunch of paid time off saved up?”

"I could probably get the time off, Rafe, but whatever the US is doing in Vietnam has caused the demand for ball bearings to go up fast. My boss has got me reconnecting with our suppliers every day to make sure our critical orders for materials stay on schedule. He also has me working almost full time with the guys involved with the expansion of our production facilities. I'll think about what you are asking, though. It might be fun, and God knows I could use a break."

"Good." I rolled onto my belly and untied the bikini top. "Put some suntan lotion on my back, Matt, please."

"You're such an animal," she said.

"After you've seen what I've seen in med school, you'll realize that you have to see bodies as blobs of flesh. Nothing special, and nothing to get too excited about if the main job is saving limbs or lives or gray matter."

"God, Rafe. You make it all sound so mechanical. Is it really as simple as reconnecting all the wires, and flipping a switch?"

"No. It's not. It's complicated, but maybe that's the real reason why I want to go back to the Bay. They tell me sex out there is getting exciting again. The idea of rubbing and touching naked bodies without having to worry about sterilizing the instruments appeals to me."

Now I was speaking Matty's language. "Okay," she said. "You can count me in. I'll work it out with the boss. How do you want to get there?"

A few weeks later, Matty and I were at a dinner party on a friend's farm near Vickery, Ohio, twelve miles southwest of Sandusky. In the interest of saving money for more important things than transportation we had bought a used, fairly ratty '49 Ford sedan for our trip. We didn't improve the external looks of it much, but with Matty's help, I overhauled the engine, increased the displacement, added two four-barrel carburetors, a racing camshaft, and muffler bypasses on both tailpipes. In this way, we hoped to occasionally make the trip more interesting, especially when dealing with people we weren't interested in spending time with.

Our friends Randall and Georgine Keegan had inherited their farm from Randall's parents. As with most farms in this part of Ohio, they raised milk cows, hogs, chickens, and a few dogs and cats. They had about three hundred acres of corn, wheat, and soybeans in cultivation, including pasture for the cows. They weren't probably going to get rich, but they worked hard, and they made a comfortable living. Georgine was pregnant with their first child.

"Why in the world do you want to drive all the way across the country to San Francisco?" she asked. "I thought it was bad enough that you were away from us for four years, let alone in that pit of sin and corruption."

"It's not such a bad place, Georgine. I learned a lot at the university. I met some good people, and I learned so many important things that I was never going to know if I had stayed here. Besides, you know I was getting crazy bored in high school. That's why I kept getting in trouble, and that's where I learned that the good news about high school detention rooms was that I could read any book I wanted. Besides, people in San Francisco are as fine as any people I have met anywhere. There are a lot of churches and places of worship. Not all of them are Catholic or Lutheran, or any denomination you might have ever heard about in Vickery. Come out sometime and let me show you around."

Georgine looked down at her feet. Randall looked out the window as if checking the weather, though the warm, sunny spring weather had not changed in a week. Matty's look told me that I had probably said something offensive. Even so, I had also wondered at the sharpness of Georgine's remark.

Matty reopened the conversation by asking about my upcoming military service. Randall suddenly looked toward me; his steady gaze full of questions.

"What's that all about?" he asked.

"I'd been thinking about signing up," I said, "so I finally did a few months ago. You know, my cousin Rafael joined up with the Green Berets after President Kennedy set up those special force units. Rafael and I have always stayed in touch, and I have always been impressed with his commitment and his belief that he is doing something important. Now that I am a medical doctor with some valuable skills, especially in wartime, I think it may be time I offered to do something important, too."

Randall was tightlipped. "I don't know if what is going on in Vietnam can be considered a war yet, though I guess LBJ wants to make it into one as soon as he can. Reminds me a whole lot of the 'police action' in Korea. What a goddamn joke. Hell, we are doing a worse job at defending 'American interests' than the French did at defending the right to eat croissants at breakfast in that shitty little country." He got up. "Excuse me, I have to go out and slop the pigs."

"Wait a minute," Georgine said. "I'll come with you."

After they stepped out the door, Matty said, "Wow! Does any of that change your mind about signing up?"

I worried my lip. "No. But maybe it is time for us to go."

As we walked toward the car, Randall called out to us: "Wait!"

He and Georgine both approached. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry for being rude."

"I am, too," Georgine said. "You are both among our very best friends, and we have no right to judge what you are going to do. We want to always support you in whatever you do, even if we don't have a clear idea of why you are doing it."

I was relieved, and we joined the couple in a hug.

Randall took a step back and ran his hand through his hair a couple of times. "I don't know about this kind of war. I'm a farmer so I am always exempt from the draft and military service, but this kind of war seems different somehow from the war I grew up with in the early forties. We are not sending our tanks and planes against our enemy's tanks and planes. We are sending all of the killing machinery and might of our military against a people who don't even have their own uniforms, and for what reason? Are we making the world safe for democracy by bombing mud huts? Is democracy and 'We the People' no longer a consideration in these kinds of wars?"

He paused for a moment. "I fear that this war will end very badly because of that terrible premise. I hate to see my very best friends getting involved, but I also understand that because of the draft, many good young men are already involved no matter what they think." He looked at me. "And good young women like you are going even without a draft. Hopefully, you can balance the lunacy and the lobbyists for the armaments industries that I see driving all this war talk from Washington. You take care of yourself, Rafaela."

"I will. Thank you."

"Me too," Matty said, "though I'll be back in the neighborhood here after Rafe and I check out some of that sin and corruption that Frisco is famous for."

Georgine burst out laughing. "I love you both," she said.

Randall didn't laugh, but he gave each of us a separate hug. "Take care," he said.

Chaos

In early June, the sun was just coming up behind us as we drove toward the Rocky Mountains. We were somewhere in the Utah desert west of Salt Lake City, driving fast across a long, flat, dry lakebed. I had bypassed the mufflers, and my speedometer read a little over 100 miles per hour. We had picked up a hitchhiker at the University of Chicago to help with the driving. He had long, scraggly hair, a tie-dyed T-shirt, and ratty old shorts and sandals. He also carried a large jar of multicolored pills. He was asleep behind me. Matty was riding shotgun, also asleep.

I gloried in the freedom — and the sound, through my open window — of the screaming engine and open pipes echoing off the surrounding hills. Suddenly, I noticed the blip-blip-blip of a flashing red light in the rearview mirror. I knew our Ford was fast, but it was about fifty miles to the Nevada border. I was briefly tempted to make a run for it, but I probably couldn't outrun the patrol car before my souped-up engine blew up. Worse, if I was caught doing something like that it would mean the end of my careful plans to go looking for Rafael.

I pulled over, as did the police officer. The officer approached our car. He was calm but frowning. "Did you see the twenty-five-mile speed limit in the town you just blew through?"

"I'm sorry, officer. I saw a couple of buildings, but I don't remember seeing a town. I know I am over the speed limit, but I'm a medical doctor, and I am trying to get to Fort Ord for some orientation to my duty station in Vietnam. I'm running late, and the road ahead looked clear and straight, and there were no cars coming." *Whatever little fib it takes*, I thought to myself.

The officer looked skeptical. "Do you have some papers that will confirm any of that?"

"Yes. I have a letter of congratulations from my medical school. I also have a letter from the army telling me where to go when I have my personal business wrapped up."

"Let me see 'em," he said. "By the way, who's your friend in the back?" He pointed at the scraggly form in the back seat, the bottle of pills hugged tightly to his body.

"A hitchhiker we picked up in Chicago to help with driving and gas money. He told us the pills are diet supplements."

After looking at the papers for a moment the officer said, "Look. I am going to do you a favor by letting you go with a warning, but please do me a favor by reconnecting your mufflers and by trying to stay somewhere close to the speed limit while you are in Utah."

I felt a flood of relief. I had gotten more stressed by the situation than I thought I would. "I will, officer. Thank you very much." The officer stood back from the car. I flipped the lever that reconnected the mufflers and pulled back onto the main highway.

Matty lifted an eyelid. "Hey, Rafe. I'm really impressed."

"Cool," said the fellow in the back seat.

The remainder of the trip across the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada was routine, with the exception of a wreck on one of the mountain passes west of Lake Tahoe. A car had gone through a railing and rolled down a hill.

An ambulance and a state trooper were parked next to the break in the railing.

Matty was driving. "Pull up to that state trooper," I said. I rolled my window down and spoke to the officer. "I'm just out of medical school, sir, trained for emergency medicine. Do you need help?"

"Yeah, maybe so, but it looks pretty bad. Hold on for a second." The officer turned to his walkie-talkie. "I've got a young woman up here who says she is a med school graduate. Can she do anything useful down there?"

The connection had a lot of static, but a voice came through. "I don't think so. His neck is at a bad

angle, and I can't get any vital signs. I don't think there is much to do but cleanup and paperwork."

"I'd like to go down anyway, officer."

He looked closely at me. "Knock yourself out," he finally said.

But there wasn't much anybody could do. I could see at a glance that nothing could be done to bring the twisted form back to life.

The ambulance crew thanked me for coming down the hill, and for being willing to stay in contact.

The three of us drove on.

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ALECK

"Get up. We have to move... NOW!"

I rolled over to grab my helmet and rifle. Somebody grabbed my shirt and pulled me up. It was barely light enough to see, so I was having trouble keeping my feet under me and moving in the right direction. A man I assumed was Mike was crouched and running ahead of me. "Where's Jack?" I whispered.

"He's ahead of us. Don't worry, we have him," Mike said. "Keep quiet. Charlie's coming."

We kept crouching, ducking, and trying to move as fast as we could through the mud and brush. The rising sun was behind us, so I knew we were running in the general direction of Khe San, but I had no idea how far we had to go.

After about a half hour of running, my feet began to drag. Mike noticed and stepped off the trail where the brush was partially cleared. He pulled me into some denser undergrowth.

"How you doin', cowboy?" he asked, his voice low.

I wanted to throw my weapon and extra clips away because they were heavy and cutting into my skin, but I knew I couldn't. "I'm out of breath and feeling totally beat up. How much farther?"

"My guide cut some brush for us, so as long as we can stay on this trail, we should be able to get to Khe San by nightfall. Otherwise we play Boy Scout for another night. The only trouble is if Charlie finds this trail, he can move along it faster than we can."

"Do you know if Charlie is close to us?" I asked.

"No, I don't, but if you stay quiet, I'll listen for noise that might tell us something." I sat back to catch my breath. Suddenly it occurred to me why Mike was so hard to see in the dark. He was black. I had to ask: "I thought Green Berets were all white boys from the Ivy League." I tried to keep my tone light, but I don't think Mike took it that way.

"Shut your mouth, white boy. I'll talk to you in a minute about that."

I tried listening to the ambient sounds to see if I could detect any signs of trouble. There were many birds, probably some monkeys chattering and snakes slithering, but no human sounds that I could hear. Nor were there the kinds of sounds that go with human activity: metallic clicks, bumps, scratching through cloth, branches breaking. Mike looked at me with his finger to his lips, so I stayed quiet.

He put his hand on my rifle, then waved a finger at me to indicate that I should stay calm. Suddenly, there was a disturbance in the brush a couple of yards away, and I almost crapped my pants. The leaves

next to Mike opened slightly, and a local man stuck his head out. By now Mike had a death grip on my rifle. I couldn't have moved it if I wanted to. Mike and the visitor talked quietly in what sounded like the visitor's native language for a few moments, then the visitor moved back into the brush and disappeared.

"That was Fres," Mike explained. "We almost have your pilot back to the Khe San base. He can move on his own, but he is pretty weak. Mostly we had to carry him on a stretcher. You and Fres and I are on our own, but your pilot has a squad of Marines to take care of stretcher-bearing and perimeter defense."

"Where has Fres gone?" I asked. I wanted to know about our own chances for survival.

"Fres was with the other group until he felt they were safe. Now, he is moving back along the trail to see if Charlie is anywhere around. If he finds Charlie, he may take him and his friends out. We won't even know about it. I think we are safe for now, so let's move out as fast as we can. Stay low. How's your leg?"

"Okay," I replied, "but I don't think I can run very far, or very fast if we get into trouble."

"I'll keep an eye on you, but I may get ahead of you and you won't know where I am. Try to keep calm because you need to keep moving. In general, I'll be moving toward the setting sun. As long as you move in that same direction, Fres or I will find you. If you lose sight of the sun or start feeling disoriented and panicky, stop where you are, make yourself invisible, and wait. If it gets dark, get comfortable, and try to get some sleep."

Jesus Christ, I thought to myself. What the hell was I thinking when I asked for this assignment?

I did pretty well, but it got dark, and I had lost track of Mike a couple of hours before. I stopped in a place where I thought I could survive the night and covered myself with some branches and leaves. I fell asleep immediately.

The sky to the east was growing light when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I opened one eye and saw Mike. He motioned me to my feet, and then to follow him. After a few hours we slipped through the perimeter defenses and into the compound set up around the Khe San Combat base.

We are home, I said to myself, at least for the time being, and as much as a forward combat base can be thought of as a home.

RAFAELA

Matty, our tie-dyed passenger, and I drove over the crest of the Coastal Range on Route 80 about ten miles above Vallejo. A local Latino rock station was on. As we continued south toward my old stomping grounds, the Golden Gate bridge came into view in the west.

"It's beautiful," Matty said.

I felt more at home here than any place else I had ever been on the planet. "Especially so in this beautiful morning sun," I said.

"This is really cool," said the guy from the back.

"You know, Tie-Dye," I looked at him in the rearview, "we don't even know your name."

"My friends call me Habit Forming, but you all can call me Hab."

Matty turned to ask, "Okay, but what's your real name, Hab?"

"Shit. I'm busted," he said. "My real name is George Steiner. What's

yours?"

Matt turned to George and extended her hand. "I'm glad to meet you, George. My name is Matty, but you can call me Matt. Her name is Rafaela. You can call her Rafe."

"Are you guys new to the Bay Area?"

"I am," Matty said. "Rafe graduated from Berkeley."

"Cool," said George. "I was born and raised in the city, over on Van Ness. My parents taught law at San Francisco State. I was in Chicago getting a master's degree in math, but mostly trying to beat the draft. That only works for so long. I finally got my notice. I have to report for basic at Fort Ord in about a week."

"I know the feeling," I said. "I have to report to the Letterman hospital on the Presidio in two weeks. Do you want us to drop you at your parents' house?"

"No. My parents don't live here anymore. The gang I run with now are all over on North Beach. You can drop me off anywhere, but if you want to go over to North Beach, I can probably get us something to eat and tell you some fun places to go this evening. Why are you reporting to Letterman?"

"I just finished med school, but I haven't done a residency yet, so I have worked out a deal where I go as a nurse and basically pick my assignment. The army said I should complete the residency and get certified as an MD, then come back. The problem with that is that there are almost no female medical doctors anywhere in Vietnam, certainly not anywhere near any front lines, and I want to get to Vietnam soon. And I want to get to the bush. I have a cousin there that I haven't heard from in months. The army only tells me that he is on an extended mission that is classified."

"Whoa," George said. "Where do you want to go?"

"The highlands around the DMZ. There's an evacuation hospital near Phu Bai that is the first stop for those wounded in the highlands. The last I heard my cousin was assigned to a unit near the Laotian border."

"Man. You got some set of balls, lady. I'm going to spend my time in this man's army trying to avoid doing anything dangerous, or even a little risky, or difficult in any way, and here you are jumping into the middle of the shit. Jesus Christ."

"Let me change the subject," Matty said. "What are some good places to go in North Beach? I've heard of City Lights, Fisherman's Wharf, Visuvio... are there other places?"

"There are many places. No matter what kind of entertainment you like, North Beach is the place to go. You can find it all there, especially when you have a name like Rafaela. North Beach is basically an Italian fishing community. There are a lot of retired fishermen from the old country scattered around the neighborhoods."

"I'm going to drive over there," Matty said. "Can you show us some of the sights, George? Maybe introduce us to some people?"

George got us settled into a cheap room in a fishermen's retirement hotel. In the hallway on our floor, we were greeted by a couple of old fishermen who were cooking a pot of fish stew. They welcomed us to San Francisco and asked if we were hungry. The stew smelled delicious. "Starving," we said in unison.

After eating and helping the old men clean up, we caught up with George, his shirt off, down on docks in the marina sunning himself. We walked around for a while then decided to take a cable car downtown for some sightseeing. I could feel myself getting bored, though. My mood did not improve on meeting some of George's friends at a lunch counter down on Market Street. Some of them were stoned, and others had been in that condition not long before. Some looked as though they might

have been stoned for the past several weeks.

We hung out for a while at a bar and strip club that evening, but I said I was going to beg off from a late evening. After several days on the road, I felt like I needed to catch up on some sleep.

Matty had been somewhat wide-eyed as she took in all the sights, sounds, and colorful inhabitants of the city. At the sight of a black man walking arm in arm with a very pregnant white woman, Matty's mouth fell open. Further along, at the sight of two Chinese men in vivid drag and high heels, she almost swooned.

"There is nothing like this in Sandusky," she said, sotto voce. I smiled to myself. "No, there is not."

Matty had also had a full day of it, then, and decided to come with me back to our room. "I'm going to stick with Rafe," she told George. "Thank you for showing us around and introducing us to your friends."

George had been getting more stoned as the night progressed. He gave us a brief two-finger wave and a lopsided smile. He turned back to his friends, who were equally out of it.

As we walked out the door, I noticed a poster for the Monterey Pop Festival for the coming weekend, about one hundred miles down the coast.

I pointed at the poster. "How about this pop festival? We will have to rearrange our schedule, but it might be worth it."

"I'm up for it. I think I can work out a few more days on the West Coast," Matty said.

"Good. Say, I know a great Chinese place a few blocks from here. Let's go there and eat, and figure what to do. I know one thing I need to do: after I visit the Presidio; I'd like to deliver our car to a friend on the faculty at Berkeley. I'm sure he can be persuaded to work with your schedule, and to drive you to the airport when it's actually time to leave."

Matty crinkled her nose and stared at me. "Is this a 'special friend,' Rafe?"

"He's pretty good in the sack if that's what you mean."

ALECK

It's fall in the highlands, and it rains a lot.

I've taken a few days to recoup and try to catch up with my editors after the trip up from Saigon and the helicopter crash back there in the boonies. Jack made it here, but they have medevacked him out to the mobile hospital at Pleiku. They tell me he is okay, but probably done with this war. I got to wish him well as they loaded him into the chopper. He told me not to take any more helicopter rides.

"You never know how those things are gonna go," he said with a big smile. We laughed and shook left hands.

For a time, I shared a hooch with a lieutenant grunt named Parker. He's from Georgia, and his nickname is Chip. He is a combat commander responsible for Company C, 3rd Regiment, 26th Marines, and he is telling me about a guy named Rafael. Rafael was born and raised in north central Ohio. His parents are part of a big Italian family in that area, most of whom work in some way with Great Lakes Shipping.

"I tell you this for background on this guy," Chip said. "Most of these Green Beret grunts are college kids who are looking for a little more action than you can get in Kennedy's Peace Corps, but

Rafael is truly a ghost among ghosts out here. Back in the world, though, he is a solid guy with solid roots in the Midwest. When you go out on this Lurp you've talked yourself into, I want you to keep an eye out for him.

"Now that I think about it, 'keep an eye out' is probably a misstatement. You won't see Rafael until he is on top of you. I could say 'keep an ear out,' but actually, that probably won't work either. You won't see him or hear him, but you might smell him. He likes to wear a flower in whatever native hat he decides to wear.

"You'll also know if you feel his touch, but you probably won't like the feeling. If he doesn't know who you are, or why you are on his turf, he may put you in a death grip before he asks any questions." Chip patted me on the shoulder. "But I am sure you won't have any problems. Get some sleep."

Then he said, "One last thing. It's not like I know anything about his mission, but he saved my ass once, and I got to know him while we were trying get out from behind enemy lines. I don't want to lose track of him if there is anything I can do to avoid it. If he is in trouble and needs my help, I want to make sure he gets whatever he needs."

Parker was right about my having talked myself into going on a Lurp. The combat base commander—a light colonel known to the Marines under his command, but never to his face, as Butthead Bukowski—said I should get some sleep because he was not sending me anywhere until he felt my chances of screwing up the mission were zero, and the chances of my surviving a crippling injury were better than fifty-fifty, whatever that meant.

"All I need is for some dog-shit reporter from some chicken-shit anti-war rag in the Midwest to screw up my mission, and get killed, or captured, or physically fucked-up on my watch," is what he actually said. "If the 'request' that I try to accommodate you hadn't come down from fairly high up, you'd be sittin' around here with your thumb up your ass until it was time for you to go home." He paused and gave me his best penetrating glare. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir, I got it. Thank you for setting me straight, sir," I said. "Do you still want me to get your picture published in your paper back home?"

"Get the fuck out of here, shithead," Colonel Butthead Bukowski said.

As it turned out, though, I sat around for several weeks with my thumb up my ass anyway. I also spent time hanging out with Lt. Parker, who I consider to be a pretty straight shooter. He gave me a lot of good background on what a combat base is and what a firebase does, and on the strategic importance of the Khe San combat base at this stage of the war.

There had been a lot of action at Khe San before I got here, but it was fairly quiet now that we were into the rainy season. The lull gave Parker and me a lot of time to talk in between my attempts to send some copy off to Penny Blue, over a flaky and irregular connection, about the situation here. We also smoked the occasional doobie and toked on some opium whenever somebody brought some onto the base that they were also, rarely, willing to share.

Parker also gave me some basic training with the weaponry used on a Lurp. I spent a lot of time perfecting my aim with an M-16, blowing up bottles and stumps with hand grenades, and getting to know some of the grunts who actually did the ground-pounding.

It is now November 1967. Each day is generally dark and rainy. Chip and I have cracked some C-rats and are chowing down. The USAF B-52 bomber air raids are continuing, weather permitting, along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and we can hear the bombs exploding. The B-52s can fly above the clouds, so they can still do some damage with radar-guided bombs. Other aircraft, like lighter bombers and

our supply choppers, can't fly in this weather. Supplies over Route 9 from Da Nang are also disrupted because of VC sappers working along the route.

This is all part of Westmoreland's strategy.

What a joke. Some of the scuttlebutt has it that the US has dropped as much ordnance on the trail as all of the ordinance dropped in Europe during World War II. Once they figure out how easy it is for the NVA to anticipate those raids, how easy to then move most of the hardware and personnel off the roads and into the woods, and to have the damage to the trail repaired within a few hours, maybe they will stop disturbing our sleep with all the noise.

Our military planners in this war should have paid more attention to the costs and benefits of the bombing campaigns against Germany in World War II, specifically one raid in particular, the October 14, 1943 raid on the extensive ball bearing works in Schweinfurt. For all of the B-17 bombers, crews, and bombs assembled for the raid by the US 8th Air Force, the production of ball bearings in Schweinfurt was back to pre-raid production levels in a matter of weeks.

Even the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have had the same effect on Japan's war-making machinery if it wasn't for the pure shock value of a single plane dropping a bomb that could cause so much damage and fiery death to so many people.

The shock value to the enemy after, say, the tenth nuclear weapon dropped on a city and killing hundreds of thousands will likely be zero in terms of an ability to discourage an enemy's desire to make more war.

The thing that killed the Japanese war effort was the immediate surrender of Emperor Hirohito within a day or two after the US dropped its second, and last available of the original three mission-ready Atomic bombs produced at Los Alamos on the city of Nagasaki.

Whatever anybody else believes, so far as I'm concerned, the atomic bomb had precisely no effect on Japan's desire to fight to the death to protect their homeland. In Germany, the war effort finally collapsed when Adolf Hitler committed suicide with his mistress instead of surrendering to the Russian armies closing in on his bunker deep underground in a Berlin neighborhood.

Now, two decades or so after Hiroshima, there is no "pure shock value" associated with the use of atomic weapons. The eyewitnesses to the blasts are either dead or dying, and the narrative about the reasons for using the bombs then was mostly transactional. In other words, the rationale for using them at the time, according to President Truman, was to reduce the loss of American lives that would result if the US invaded Japan with a ground force.

There is no longer a moral or ethical dimension to the decision-making involved with strategic bombing, nuclear bombs or not; there is only the cost-benefit analysis, like being in a grocery store and deciding to buy chocolate or peanut butter. No wonder the grunts on the ground here are suffering such low morale; no wonder there is so much escape from reality. I am beginning to think that there is no reality here, only a faint disturbance in the global propaganda and mutual stroking that sustains these actions and this war effort.

I'm sure that Westmoreland is considering the use of nuclear weapons on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, just to prove to his many critics—in the press, in the government, and within the military itself—that his strategy is correct in dealing with his military problem. It is a problem so severe that Westmoreland believed that the use of nuclear weapons is justified. If he did get approval from Washington to use them, I just hope he would do us the courtesy of giving us news guys and the grunts around the trail enough time to get the hell out of the way.

Colonel Butthead finally gave me permission to go out with a Lurp. The mission will involve a squad of Marines from the combat base doing recon along a trail to a Green Beret outpost at Lang Vei. Lang Vei is very close to the Lao border. We leave at 04:00 tomorrow. Butthead told me I would have to gain the trust of each of the members of the squad before I could go with them.

"If any squad member doesn't want you to go, then you don't go. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. Got it, sir," I said. "Where do I find the squad?"

"They are gathering their gear and supplies over next to the ops shack. You better get over there."

He started away, then paused and turned back to me. "One last thing. I have been impressed with the work you have been doing with Lt. Parker. He is also impressed with the improvement in your weapon handling, and in your physical ability to handle the sheer hard work involved on a Lurp. He has been your strongest advocate," Butthead said, "and he has agreed to go along to look out for you. You better get a move on. Find Parker and take him with you to help break the ice with the squad."

Parker caught up to me as I made my way to the ops shack. He had removed his insignia of rank. The squad members were in battle fatigues, and were already packing up their gear, getting ready for the early morning start. Parker introduced me to the squad leader for this mission, Sergeant Jerry Collins. Collins is a big guy, at least six-three or six-four. He shook my hand but didn't say anything. He pointed to the other members of the squad, then gives a nickname as he points to each one. A short, stubby guy is "Hap." A skinny guy with sideburns and barely a beard is "Ralphie." Another big guy, more heavy than tall, is an American Indian named "Sitting Bull, sometimes just Bull."

After the introductions, Collins turned to Parker and asked if he wanted to say anything about me.

Parker told them he has been working with me and has been training me on weapons and fitness. "I'll be going out with you guys to help Aleck get his story about what we do, and to know how to keep out of the way while you do it. He's a good guy, and he has been working hard to be able to do this with you. I do outrank Collins, but he is your commander on this mission. Don't forget it. If I am forced to remind any of you to look to Collins for leadership if things get tricky, I'll remind you, once again, that Collins is the boss, and I will remind you in ways that you won't forget for the rest of your tour of duty.

"Give Morris something useful to do on the Lurp. Otherwise, he'll start thinking this is just a long hike like the ones he used to go on holding hands with his sweetheart back in Minnesota. Give him some gear to haul and be responsible for, and make sure that he gets a weapon with a couple of clips to use if things get bad in the shit. I have been training with him. He knows how to handle your weapons, he understands basic tactics, and he is a better shot than a lot of the other combat grunts I know on this base."

One of the guys, "Mary Jane," asks, "What the fuck you doin' here, man? You don't even have to be here in this shithole, and you all are going out on a combat mission? You're fuckin' nuts, man. We're gonna get our asses shot at, and some swingin' dick's gonna get hurt, guaranteed."

I didn't have any quick answers for Mary Jane, but I knew I had to say something. "Look, I know you see me as probably more of a liability than an asset to this mission. Going on this patrol is probably the most important thing I will do while I am in Vietnam, and I promise I will do everything I can to not let you guys down."

Another guy — name of Choi, a weapons guy — asked what I would do if Parker and Collins got into a pissing contest during a firefight. "Who you gonna go with?"

"Collins," I answered with no hesitation.

Another guy butted in. "Is Parker your babysitter?"

"I don't have a babysitter. Collins is squad leader. Collins is the boss." From the back, I heard,

"Good answer." A guy smiled my way and said, "Not common over here in the shit."
"Let's cut the bull and get you some gear," Collins said. "Pollock, you help him out."
The guy from the back nodded. "Got it, Sarge." "Sounds good to me," I said.

RAFAELA

Despite our best efforts, we did not find a decent hotel near the festival in Monterey. Rather than sleep in some fleabag a ways out of town, we decided to find some space on the beach to camp out.

Even the beach was crowded with transient festivalgoers who could not afford to or did not want to buy hotel space, but who were in the mood for a big party. For two attractive women from northern Ohio, our night was full. We got up late the next day, and spent some time finding something to eat and deciding which acts we were most interested in.

Over a cheesy croissant, Matt suggested that Big Brother and the Holding Company were featuring their incredible singer Janis Joplin, and that they would be onstage early Saturday morning. "The George known as Hab told me that she and the band have been playing the clubs in the Haight, and her singing will literally 'blow your socks off' is how I think he put it. I think if we do nothing else here, we need to hear Janis Joplin sing."

Back in San Francisco at the Presidio on Monday, I drove to my appointment with a Captain Dave Margolis, head of the medical unit. He grinned and shook my hand, then invited me to sit down. "Welcome, Doctor."

"I'm not quite a full doctor yet, though I hope to be one as soon as I complete my obligations here, and get into a residency," I said.

"Well," said Margolis, "I hope we can help make that possible. Your papers are squared away, and I've got clearance to put you on a bus to Fort Ord tomorrow. Are you ready to travel?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Ask any soldier where it is. You will do about ninety days of training on how to look and act like a lieutenant who is also a military nurse. Once that is done, as I understand it, you'll be flown out to Saigon, then dispatched out to the 22nd surgical hospital at Phu Bai up by the DMZ. The commanding officer at Phu Bai is Captain Tom Burgess from Tuscaloosa.

He graduated from Ol' Miss. He is a good guy, but he talks funny and can be rough around the edges. He has a lot of experience with combat trauma, though. He has been briefed about you and is looking forward to the medical help you can provide. The nurses up there tell me he knows his stuff, but he can be a real shithead about procedure if you get on his bad side. Unless you have any more questions of me, good luck and Godspeed."

I had to "fit in" during my time in the Officer Candidate School training company so that I could become one of the army's desperately needed ninety-day wonders--second lieutenants, in other words. In this training company the drill instructor was a frustrated student of medicine herself. She had an undergrad degree in pre-med but then lost a scholarship and could not afford to go on to med school. She joined the army and is taking night courses in nursing. The DI hated the idea that I was already a doctor and was now learning how to be a nurse, and I couldn't say I blamed her.

At the company's first muster, our DI walked into the room. "Attention. My name is Sergeant Genevieve Carson. I am your drill instructor, and believe you me I will be on your ass for the full ninety days of your time here — assuming, or course, that you have enough lead in your ass or grit enough in your backbone to put up with me and stay the full ninety days.

"My job is to find out what you do have to offer us and what you don't have to offer us. I'm damn good at finding things about you that you never thought you had, good or bad. If you don't have what it takes, I am going to send you back to your pathetic, enlisted grunt job so fast you won't know what hit you. You will probably cry on the way out of my office. You might even start begging for another chance. But you know what?" The DI looked around the room, allowing a few moments while her new charges let their imaginations run wild. "I'm not even going to give a shit. Now get in front of your bunk and get ready to sound off with your name, rank, and MOS."

When I gave my name, the DI let her eyes linger on me for a moment before moving on.

After names had been given, she walked up to me. "Listen up, all you grunts. This is a DOCTOR training to be a nurse." She paused. "My fuckin' ass."

The DI looked around at the other trainees, then, since she was much shorter, back up at me.

"Who the fuck do you think you are, Barardi?" she asked. "You haven't even been through army basic yet like the rest of these poor bitches and you are already trained and ready to start earning millions of fuckin' bucks for sticking your finger up people's asses. Why don't you drop and give me fifty so you can get a feel for what those asshole male doctors are going to do to you out in some field tent in the boondocks — and I don't mean they are only going to ask you to get them coffee. Get down on your skinny belly and give me fifty. ...NOW, God damn it!"

I was in good shape, but I hadn't done fifty push-ups since college basketball. Nevertheless, I completed the task and stood up to face the DI, out of breath.

"Come to attention when you finish doing what I tell you to do, DOCTOR. Say, 'Thank you, sergeant.' Say it loud, say it right now."

"THANK YOU, SERGEANT!"

"Good. Don't ever say, 'Thank you, sir.' If you do you will have to do it all over again. Are we clear?"

"YES, SERGEANT! THANK YOU, SERGEANT."

"That's good, Barardi. You're not as dumb as you look. You be my good little poodle dog for ninety days and maybe we will get along." Sergeant Carson moved away to her next object of abuse. All the other women were standing at stiff attention and staring straight ahead.

I wondered to myself just what I had gotten myself into.

ALECK

Collins was pissed. The radio was fucked up, and the radio guy, Easterman, couldn't call in an airstrike on an NVA position set up below them across Highway 9, about a mile west.

The NVA was too far away for our sharpshooter, so Collins determined to get closer. I wasn't too happy with that idea. I guess my recent experience in the deep bush in hostile territory still lingered with me, but I really couldn't say anything about that, and I really couldn't say that I didn't want to go. I started picking up my gear to move out.

Collins spoke up. "Things could get hot, lieutenant. You and Morris may want to stay up here while we take care of business down below. We'll get back to you as soon as we can."

Parker looked in my direction, but I kept my face expressionless. I continued gathering my gear, but a million thoughts were running through my mind. Then Collins looked at me, and I blurted out: "I need to come with you, but I don't want to screw up tactics or get caught in any crossfire. Is there a place where I can see what's going on, and you guys can find me after it is over?"

Collins looked down for a moment, then to the west. "You see that rocky outcrop about a half click from here? You have to stay behind us, but you can follow us so long as you can keep us in sight. If you lose us, head for the outcrop. We will get there when we get there. If we don't get back to you, figure you are probably on your own. Plan on staying the night, then make your way to Lang Vei at first light tomorrow morning. There is a firebase there with a bunch of Green Berets. If you can make contact with them, they will get you back to Khe San.

"The main thing to remember is that all of Route 9 is contested territory. We might control a piece of it one day; then the VC will take control of the same piece the next day. Typically, what either of us does when we first retake control of a piece of the road is hide and set up an ambush. Before you show yourself anywhere on the road, stop, look, and listen. Don't make a move until you know for sure who is in control.

"All those B-52s that have been bombing the shit out of the trees and dirt along the trail haven't really done any more than stir up a big hornet's nest. NVA troop strength is building in this whole area every day. So, watch your ass, stay in the woods, and stay off anything that looks like a regular trail."

Mary Jane sat nearby with an ear cocked in our direction. "Uncle Ho has figured that Uncle Sammie thinks the war can be won by bombing the trail. The Ho Ho man wants to send enough troops and weaponry into this area to keep Johnson and Westmoreland thinking that the bombing is the only way to stop the NVA providing support for their NVA buddies in the south. If the NVA collapses in the south, why, shit, man, those two think we can be home by Christmas." He Jane broke out into a raucous laugh, then stopped. "What a fuckin' joke."

Mary Jane looked like he had more to say, but Collins cut him off. "Let's go."

Parker grabbed his gear. We waited for a few minutes before following the squad down the hill toward the NVA position. It became clear right away that we could neither keep up nor keep the squad in sight. They disappeared almost immediately. Collins' comments about the NVA buildup in the area also began to work on our minds.

Parker spoke first. "We need to clear our heads about what, exactly, we're doing. We can't be anywhere near that squad if they get into a firefight. If Charlie finds us, we can't survive on our own away from the squad anyway, even with the weapons we have, even if Charlie does something stupid .. which he is not probably going to do.

"We need to move now to the outcrop and see what happens from there. Maybe we will get lucky and have a good view of the NVA position so you can get your story."

I was familiar with this kind of bushwhacking because of my escape after the helicopter crash on the way up to Khe San with Jack. The number one rule: stay away from anything that looks like a trail, because it is probably booby-trapped. Booby-trapped or not, Charlie will recognize your footprints and will come after you if you give him a trail of shoe prints. Remember that Charlie is probably wearing old, worn-out shoes that may have been repaired by strapping pieces of old tires together. He might track down his own mother if it meant he could get a new pair of shoes.

We were now a couple of hundred yards from the outcrop. Parker signaled for a break, and we sat down. The bush was fairly dense, so we couldn't see much.

Suddenly, an Asian face appeared in front of me with his hands up and his palms out toward me. His face was no more than two feet from mine. I recognized Fres, the Hmong tracker with Mike Fredrickson, the Green Beret who helped get me the rest of the way to Khe San after the crash. Fres had his finger to his lips, so I reached over to touch Parker, who had his back to me. He had not yet seen Fres. I didn't want Parker to suddenly turn around and see an enemy.

Parker was astonished, but Fres and I both had our fingers to our lips and our other hands up with the palm facing him. Parker looked at me quizzically, but he did not pull his service revolver. I deferred to Fres, who indicated that we should stay put and wait. He turned around and disappeared into the brush.

About ten minutes later, the bush parted once again, and Mike Fredrickson appeared. "Hey, guys. What's up?"

"Hey, Mike. It's good to see you again, I think. This is my pal, Lieutenant Chip Parker."

"Hey Chip, how's it hangin'?" Mike didn't wait for an answer. "Here's the deal. You guys have busted into one of our ops. We are trying to take out that NVA installation down there just off the highway. They have been doing a lot of damage since they set up a few days ago. We were ready to do it this morning until we saw you guys come on the scene. Rafael is trying to get to your guys before they all get wiped out. Charlie has probably been watching since you left Khe San; they probably have the ambush set. They might be watching you, actually the four of us, now."

"Did you say Rafael?" Parker asked.

"Yes, I did. He is one of our best. The only reason I use his name is because you know him. And he knows you."

Fres punched Mike on the shoulder and pointed toward a truck coming up the highway. It appeared to be Russian, which meant NVA.

"We've got to get down to your team. C'mon. Try and keep up. Fres will help you."

Mike disappeared into the brush. As the truck got closer to us, gunfire broke out from what I knew to be Collins' position. Parker and I followed Fres down the hillside, trying our best not to trip on the underbrush. I caught a glimpse of the NVA position on the highway, and noted that they were looking toward Collins, probably trying to find where the gunfire was coming from. One of them pointed a rifle at this position, then dropped as though shot.

An NVA machine gun opened up and began tearing up the hillside around Collins. Another rifle opened up near Collins' position and took out the NVA machine gunner. He was quickly replaced, and the new gunner continued to fire.

"That's Rafe," Mike said. "He's working alone. I have to get down there to help him out. Fres, see if you can get Parker and Aleck to Collins' position. If Collins has a radio, try to get through to our guys, and get them out here ASAP, ready to do some evacuations and some hunting. The weather is shitty, but it might be breaking up. See if you can raise a chopper from Khe San to help us out. We may have casualties."

Parker spoke up. "Wait. I owe Rafe. I promised myself if he ever got in trouble, I'd give him all the help I could. I'm coming with you. If you need me to lay in some covering fire while you guys do your magic, I'll do it. Morris is good in the bush, and he knows the weaponry. He can help Fres take care of whatever Collins is dealing with."

I took note of the truck and was glad to see that it was backing up, trying to get away from the

firefight. That was good news; it said they were more transport than combat. It took Fres and I about fifteen minutes of bushwhacking to get down to Collins. Collins was out with a head wound. I looked for Pollock.

"We've taken some hits," he said. "Mary Jane and Hap are gone. Collins is functional but groggy. The only good news I have for you is the radio. I think Easterman has almost got it going again. We need some help, and the only way we can get it is the radio. If either you or your pal can get that radio to at least get some kind of a signal back to base, I'll put all you greenies in for some kind of a medal, or at least a beer back in your hooch in Lang Vei. Even you, Morris."

I had gotten to know Easterman on the way here. Whatever had happened to the radio was probably caused by rainwater getting into the works rather than any operator error. We found him busy drying parts and connections. Fres helped with this. In his time working with the Green Berets, Mike told me that Fres had made himself useful by working with the electronics. His English was still pretty rocky, but he was a fast learner, and he jumped right in with Easterman to dry parts.

Pretty soon they were able to get the radio to light up, but there was no real way to test the sending signal except to start sending a signal for help on the channels for Khe San and Lang Vei and keep repeating it.

Pollock came over to us. "I'm seeing some action from the NVA across the road. I think they are calling heavier firepower into our position. That's bad news for us. Unless the shooters are able to take them out, our only hope is that your signal is getting out, and the white hats can get to us most ricky-tick. Is the radio working?"

"Looks good so far," Easterman said. "We're getting a signal out."

A minute later, an artillery shell came over and blew up some trees about a hundred yards above us. Dirt, branches, and rocks started falling. Easterman spread his arms over the radio to protect it. The NVA were bracketing our position with artillery shells. A couple more shots and they would have us. Washington and Choi, the BAR man and the sharpshooter, were scrambling to get to firing positions to the left and right away from the squad and the radio. Washington began firing the BAR in short bursts, while Choi concentrated on repeated aiming and firing with his sniper rifle.

I looked down and saw that Rafael and Parker were scrambling to cross the road, covering each other while one or the other tried to get close enough to use grenades and hand-to-hand knife work on whoever remained at Charlie's position.

Somebody in the NVA position was calling in corrections to their artillery. The sharpshooters knew they would have to find him and take him out before he was able to guide the artillery to Collins and the radio.

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Yesterday, I woke up groggy with my head and shoulder bandaged up. Not knowing where I was, I started trying to get out of the bed. A nurse came running up to me with some kind of a needle.

At least, I think it was yesterday. It might have been last week. Anyway, the nurse jabbed me with the needle, and I fell back to sleep. I feel a little more alert now, but I have no idea where I am or what happened to me. Last I remember, an artillery shell was heading my way during a firefight somewhere out on Route 9.

I am not in a regular hospital, though. I am in some kind of tent with several beds. Some of the other beds in my area are occupied by others with war wounds. I guess that this is a field hospital. I hear gunfire in the far distance, so I suppose we are near some action, but I don't know where. I can feel pain in several places on my body. The pain in my head is intense. My left eye is covered with a bandage. I can see and hear,

though, and my thinking is clear enough that I am less worried about the severity of the injuries.

Most important, there are no bandages and no pain down near my private parts. Thank god. I have dodged "the wound to end all wounds." Scuttlebutt has it that a GI will give up any other body part to a combat war wound, but not those little babies between his legs.

Today, a female lieutenant with a stethoscope approached my bed. "Hey, soldier. Welcome. If you are really awake, I'll bet you have a lot of questions. I'm going to take your temperature and check out some vital signs while we talk."

"Okay. First, I'm not a soldier. I'm a correspondent with *The Prairie Observer*, a little review of current events and news out of Minneapolis. My first question is who are you?"

"I'm Rafaela. I'm new on the job here, but I do have a medical degree and I do plan to do my residency for a real MD and a real hospital ER job when I get out. How in the world did you get yourself attached to a combat mission as a correspondent?"

"I had to work for it but going out with a squad on a Lurp is the most important thing I will do as a correspondent here. I promised the squad that I would write about it for the folks back home in a way that would help them understand what this war is all about. I can't believe my good luck in still having all my parts and most of my wits after getting wounded like this."

"Yes. You are very lucky."

Rafaela has beautiful eyes, dark skin, and beautiful dark, curly hair. More important than her looks, she has a way of looking at me that is totally engaging. With that bedside manner she is going to be a hell of a doctor. I discovered that I was getting a hard-on. I was torn between hoping she was not embarrassed by it, on the one hand, and, on the other, wishing I was mobile enough and knew enough about her to make some friendly moves. "Do you know anything about the other guys on my squad?"

"Yes, I do," she said. "How much detail do you want?"

"I recall that two were already dead by the time I got to their position. The squad leader, a sergeant named Collins, had been hit, and was pretty much out of it. Pollock and the rest of the squad were basically functional. Two sharpshooters were moving into better firing positions, but I don't recall them shooting at anybody. I was working with the radio operator, Easterman, trying to get a signal back to base for some help. There was a Hmong by the name of Fres Thao also working on the radio.

"Fres was working with a black Green Beret named Fredrickson who helped me get out of a bad situation when I first came up here from Saigon. There was a lieutenant named Parker who had been helping me out, and was with me on the Lurp, but he went to help another Green Beret named Rafael who he owed a favor."

Rafaela's eyes grew wide at the mention of the name. She became short of breath, and her talk was suddenly rushed.

"Is something the matter? I asked.

"Rafael is my cousin. I'm actually here because I am trying to find him. He has been out of touch for several months. All we can get out of the military is that he is on an extended confidential mission. You might be the first person I've met here who might have actually laid eyes on him."

"I'm sorry I don't know more." Actually, I did know more, but I was reluctant to tell this particular nurse anything about it. "I'm sorry, I don't remember anything after that except the noise of an artillery shell that was headed my way."

Rafaela had finally managed to relax as I related this information to her. "That's okay," she said.

"You have given me some hope that he might still be alive. I have to caution you, though, about saying anything about Green Berets or their operations in this area. I don't think their presence here is a secret, but the things they do on some of their missions are. Just be discreet. I'd like to talk to you more, but I've got to look in on some other patients. I'll be back."

She turned back to me: "By the way, you are in a temporary field hospital at Khe San. The weather and enemy artillery and other actions are preventing evacuations for now. We hope to get you and others out of here to Da Nang in a day or two. Your friend Easterman is two beds down. He hasn't returned to consciousness yet, but he will soon. If you both like cribbage I'll see if I can rustle up a board."

"Just one more question. Do you know how I got here from the firefight?" I asked.

She looked impatiently at her watch. "No, I really don't. All I know for sure is that five days ago one of the air mobile helicopters came in hot with some damage from ground fire. I was told by one of the other nurses that you and Easterman were on the floor of it, unconscious. Between the weather and hostile fire going out and coming back, according to the pilot and gunner, you were all lucky to get here at all."

"How about the others?" I asked.

"I don't know. Sorry. The pilot went out again, but he didn't come back this time."

"What happened to Fres? Do you know?"

"There was no mention of any natives, Montagnard, Hmong, or otherwise, being involved in that particular action."

I thought for a moment as Rafaela turned to go again. "Wait," I said. She paused. "I don't know how the battle up on the highway turned out, so I don't know if I should tell you this." Rafaela turned back to look at me, her eyes wide and her look intense. "One of the last things I remember is Rafael and one of our riflemen moving in on the artillery setup that finally did my squad in. Those were heroic acts that I intend to report on. I wish I could tell you if they were successful."

Rafaela's voice quavered. "You were right to tell me. Thank you." She turned away from me then and left the room.

I have resolved to try and get a story about all this to Penny Blue as soon as possible. I need a typewriter, though, and I hope that Rafaela can find one I could borrow. I'm sure her operating room calm will return soon, but the constant uncertainty about her cousin Rafael over all these months has to be tough.

She returned later to change my "stop-the-bleeding" dressings into something less scary and more travel-worthy.

The next day a doctor came to see me. He told me my wounds were not particularly serious, but they would need attention over the next few days. "You are not confined to your bed, but you need to rest, and you need to stay close by. I don't want to have to go looking for you if we catch a break on transportation. Apparently the NVA is putting a major offensive together so I would like to get everybody out of here as soon as possible."

"Thanks for the update, doctor, but I left some good men up on the DMZ. Is there any way I can get back up there to see if I can help out?"

He shook his head. "You have to be crazy as shit to even think about doing that, and I have to be crazy as shit to even think about giving you a go-ahead. Don't ask me that again. Besides, you're a goddamn correspondent. You aren't even grunt infantry. You wouldn't know what to do with an

AR-15 if it jumped up and bit you on the ass.”

This didn't sit with me quite right, so I decided to set him straight. “Ah, yes,” I said, sitting up as best I could on my hospital cot. “You don't understand, but I very much would know what to do with an AR-15 and with any number of other standard-issue small arms. So why don't you quit giving me so much shit about my going back up the road? You all have a firebase at Lang Vei. If you have a supply chopper or truck going up there, and the pilot has no objections, what are you going to do if I ride along?”

He wasn't backing down without a fight. “If you value your career as a journalist,” he said, “you probably don't want to piss off somebody like me. I have a lot of important shit to worry about, and I am not going to spend any time arguing with you about this. I am telling you, do not leave this compound without my say-so. If you do leave and you get killed, I'll try and get the commanding officer of whatever unit you are assigned to send a note to your mom. If you don't get killed, I'll give the MPs a full report of this conversation. You will be on your own to explain yourself.”

With that, the doctor left. I knew in that very moment that it had become my sworn duty to get to Lang Vei to check out what happened on Route 9 a week ago, and, in particular, what had happened to Rafael, Army Green Beret and cousin to the beautiful Rafaela.

To get to the Lang Vei camp from the Khe San firebase I would have to go through the area where I was wounded. More importantly, it was the area where I had last seen Rafael. I had to decide whether or not to tell Rafaela about my plan, knowing that she would insist on going with me. When she asks, I will need to either have a convincing way to say absolutely not, or a hell of a good plan to convince her that we can get into the area and back out again without getting shot or captured. If Rafaela asks me what will happen to her military career if she is away from the field hospital when wounded soldiers are brought in I would have no answer for her, but I will have to discuss it with her tonight.

If I survive and can get back to Khe San more or less physically intact I have already written off any thoughts of another assignment as an in-country war correspondent.

The doctor did not restrict me to my hospital bed, so I decided to dress and head for the general mess where the off-duty grunts eat. Maybe I could pick up some intel on the current conditions on Route 9.

Once in the dining hall I took my C-rats to a table where five grunts were talking and playing a noisy card game with lots of cursing and slapping the table. Their rifles were stacked against an adjoining table, but the thing that convinced me that they were combat infantry were the Airborne shoulder patches on their jackets.

“Hey guys. Mind if I join you?”

“Shit yeah, man,” one said. “Sit down. You got money or drugs?”

“Ah, no, but I do have a story to tell about how I got these wounds in a firefight on Route 9. Is that good enough?”

The hand slamming and bullshit ceased abruptly. All eyes turned toward me.

“Who you shittin', man? You're not even military. You're a correspondent hack trying to pick up some local color for some small town rag where everybody hates the baby killers, right?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. Basically, you're right about why I'm in this shithole country, but I'm not here in front of you hoping for some bullshit story for the home folks. I am looking for updated information on the conditions between here and Lang Vei. I got wounded in a firefight on Route 9 a week ago. I left

a buddy back there, and I mean to go back and get him. Can you guys give me some help or not?"

"C'mon, man. Take the chip off your shoulder," the main instigator said. "Call me Hack. If you are worried about military rules you can call me Lieutenant Hack. You want a toke?"

"Sure. I'll take a drag." Hack passed what was left of a joint over to me. I took a long pull on the roach. I did manage to burn my fingers on it, but the charge felt good going down.

"So, you're saying that you were part of that Lurp that got tangled up with some NVA artillery a few days ago. Is that right?"

"That's right," I replied. One of the other grunts asked how I got assigned to that Lurp. "I earned my way by doing the push-ups and learning the mission and the armaments. Plus, I told the CO, a guy named Bukowski, that I would get his picture in his hometown paper."

Hack spoke up. "That's funny, man. I know Butthead. He's good people. So... if I ask Butthead how you earned your way onto that Lurp, he will know what I am talking about?"

"Yes."

Hack leaned forward. "Okay. What do you want from us?"

"Only information about the danger of traveling Route 9 between here and Lang Vei tomorrow morning."

"That's easy. The NVA are building up a big offensive. They've pulled their remote units back away from the DMZ to make sure everybody is coordinated when the attack starts. I think Route 9, today, is as safe as it has been since Dien Bien Phu in 1954."

I had to ask. "How do you know?"

"We were up there yesterday. It was quiet. What's your plan for getting up there anyway?"

"I haven't thought quite that far ahead yet, but I am all ears for anything you have to say about transportation opportunities."

"Well." He consulted with the other grunts. "Maybe there is a way we can help. Before you go much further with this dumbass idea, though, I have to tell you that I think the road will probably be safe enough for travel tomorrow. That means you stand a good chance of coming back alive." He paused for a moment. "But I wouldn't guarantee your safety beyond the day after tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I don't know when the NVA will launch their attack. When they do launch, I think they will sweep south of the DMZ and we won't be able to stop them."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this kind of talk from a combat lieutenant. "Where the hell are you hearing this stuff? I'm not hearing anything in the news channels about an imminent attack — especially not one big enough to sweep everything south of the DMZ."

"If you believe something different than what I am telling you now then you are reading too many press releases from Westmoreland's PR office. You have to understand that Westmoreland may be the world's dumbest general. He gets his position by being the world's most handsome boozier and bullshit artist at Washington cocktail parties. He makes a great impression on the wives of politicians. Me and the other grunts keep trying to tell our commanders what we are learning in the field about NVA strategy. They keep telling us that our concerns are falling on deaf ears in HDQ. HDQ truly believes that using B-52s to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail will wear the enemy down, and he will soon come beggin' for a ceasefire."

Another GI spoke up. "They don't understand how fast Uncle Ho can shut down their operations on

the trail, night or day. They can move their vehicles and people far enough away that they don't suffer much bomb damage. As soon as the bombers have moved on, they can quickly get the vehicles back on the road, fix any damage, and be on their way with their loads of machine guns, mortars, and ammo."

Hack spoke up again. "We believe that by now they have infiltrated several divisions into the south below the DMZ. At least a couple of those divisions are probably very close to Saigon. They are simply waiting for a signal from Uncle Ho that he is moving south across the DMZ. They will follow Ho till the end of time. Ho is the only leader they trust to throw out the invaders of their country: the Chinese, the French, the Catholics, and now the Americans.

"But you don't have to pay any attention to my ramblings. You've got a man down west of here. My guys here and me, we don't like the idea of leaving a man on the field after a fight under any circumstances, whether he is dead or alive. If your story checks out with Butthead, we will find him and bring him back."

I was speechless at this. "Jesus. My confidence that I can survive this has just gone up. I won't ask whether or not you are shitting me. Just tell me what you want me to do to make this happen."

"You need to tell us everything you know about that firefight before you got wounded. And you need to tell us what your real reason is for going out to find this guy. Was he a member of your Lurp, or was he a member of a different unit?" I must have hesitated because he said, "Come on, man. You got to tell us these things now."

"There are a couple of things I haven't told you," I admitted, "but here they are. This 'guy' is a Green Beret based at Lang Vei. His name is Rafael Barardi. I've never met him, but I know of him through a Hmong tribesman named Fres Thao. Fres had been adopted by Rafael's unit as a guide and interpreter. They had trained him as a radio tech, but he had many skills and a lot of specific knowledge of the terrain, the people, and the territory. I was told that he had a lot of detailed knowledge of the Ho Chi Minh Trail over at least one hundred miles on either side of the intersection with Route 9.

"I know Fres because Fres got me through enemy lines when our helicopter took some ground-fire hits and had to crash-land several clicks below Khe San. This was a couple of months ago. Fres had crossed paths with our Lurp and was with us in the Route 9 firefight. He was working with another Green Beret sergeant named Mike Fredrickson.

"When I got wounded Rafael was trying to move up to take out the gunners who were killing us with artillery fire. I don't actually know if he got hit. He was still moving toward the artillery threat when my world went blank."

"Okay. I want you and I to go see Butthead. If Butthead tries to kill this recovery operation, then you and I will have to decide between ourselves how to proceed," Hack said. He waved toward his team. "These guys will have to make their own decision on this, but let's you and I try to figure out what we need to do next."

"There is one more thing I need to tell you," I said. "I have been debating whether or not I should, but you all seem to be willing to put a lot on the line for this and you need this last piece of the puzzle. Rafael has a cousin named Rafaela. She is a medical doctor who trained in trauma medicine at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. More important, she is here in Vietnam as a nurse. Actually, she is here on this base. She's the one who put me back together and made me able to talk to you now.

"I have gotten to know her. I like her. I want to help her find her cousin Rafael. I know she will want to come with us."

"You guys have got your heads so far up your asses you can see the cavities in your wisdom teeth. Hack. I told you to quit smoking that local shit. It will kill you."

Colonel Bukowski is in rare form today. Hack and I had laid the whole plan out for discussion. We needed a light truck, something bigger than a Jeep, and we needed to be ready for any NVA surprises along the way. Bukowski agreed with Hack's assessment of the enemy threat, but the situation around the DMZ was changing daily. The question was whether we needed something more than the standard weapon typical for a light duty patrol.

These questions were resolved in favor of somewhat heavier armaments packed away so they would not be visible, and therefore not seem threatening, from the surrounding hills. Hack and the three grunts I had met earlier in the day would ride in the back of our vehicle.

One question remained. We needed to talk to Rafaela's boss, the same doctor who told me that I could not leave Khe San. We needed to secure his permission for me to go, and because we would be looking for a man possibly wounded and possibly possessing important military information, we needed an experienced trauma nurse to go with us. Rafaela fit that bill perfectly. We just needed to get the boss doctor to agree. As a civilian it was clear that I should stay out of that discussion.

I counted myself lucky that Bukowski had gotten his head into the mission mostly because he had not heard anything from Lang Vei since the firefight on Route 9. In addition to the military mantra about leaving no wounded behind Bukowski also felt duty bound by his mission, his rank, and the battlefield history of the United States Marines to find out what was going on out there, especially given the rumors of an impending attack from the north across the DMZ.

Bukowski would talk to the doctor and get his permission to take Rafaela along.

Bukowski and Hack decided that we would leave just before sunup tomorrow morning. We hope to take advantage of the irregular light conditions so we can try to have a trouble-free ride to Lang Vei.

While Bukowski and Hack and the grunts went to get their equipment ready, I went to brief Rafaela and get her head into the mission. If she had concerns, I was to bring her immediately to Bukowski and Hack to discuss them.

"I was wondering where you had gotten off to," Rafaela said. "My supervisor told me you were free to move around, but you could not leave these facilities. Your wounds still need attention."

"I know," I said, "but things are happening fast, and you need to get ready to go on an emergency mission."

She was astonished. "What did you say?"

"I'll tell you as you start packing your gear. The unit commander here, Colonel Bukowski, has authorized a mission to find out what has happened at Lang Vei. He hasn't heard anything since our firefight, and he needs to figure out what happened. If there are casualties, we need to bring them back. If there are wounded, that's where you come in. How soon can you be ready?"

"I have to hear from my supervisor, Dr. Castro, before I am willing to stop doing my patient rounds, but I'll be ready if he assigns me to your mission."

"A big reason why you have been chosen for this is your training as a trauma doctor. Bring whatever equipment and supplies you need for that sort of work in the field. Can you handle that?"

"I can handle that. Now get out of here so I can finish my rounds and gather my gear."

I lingered in the doorway. "What if one of the wounded is your cousin?"

I could tell I'd struck a nerve. "Don't patronize me," Rafaela said. "Just get back to your business. When your team is ready, I will be ready."

I had finished packing my gear and laid down for a nap when Hack showed up.

"Get up. We're pulling out in fifteen minutes." "What? What the hell time is it?"

"It is early, so get up. Get up now, goddamn it!"

He gave me another rough shaking. As I started to roll out of the sack he said, "We are about to get a rain dump. Bukowski thinks we can take advantage of the cover the rain offers and cut down the risk of engagement if we leave now. We might be able to make it all the way to Lang Vei before the rain stops."

"Is everybody signed off on this? What about Rafaela and her supervisor?"

"Everybody is signed off. Bukowski wants us to go now, and he means right now. Do you have your gear ready?"

"Yeah. I'm ready. Except for my rain gear and long johns. Give me a minute."

"We will be out front. We've got an armored six-by-six with a canopy. It will be like riding in a limo," Hack said.

I came out a few minutes later. Hack helped me throw my junk into the back of the truck. Then we jumped in and took off, heading for Route 9.

Rafaela was in the back with me and three of Hack's grunts from the mess hall. They were checking our armaments. We had a .30-caliber and a .50-caliber Browning machine gun plus a variety of personal weapons like .45-cal service pistols and AR-15s with boxes of ammo. We even had a couple of M-1 rifles with bayonets.

So much heavy shit was happening in such a short time that my head was spinning. Hack had crawled up front with the driver, who was another member of his team.

He returned to us. "You guys had better make sure those weapons are functional for you. If you don't know how to load, aim, and shoot at least one of those weapons, you ain't gonna be worth much to anybody here including yourself. My guys will handle the heavy stuff. Aleck, Rafaela? Can you guys handle those light weapons?"

Rafaela answered. "Yeah, Hack. I was raised on a farm. I can take a rabbit's eye out at a hundred yards. What else do you want to know?"

"No shit. I believe it. How 'bout you, Aleck?"

"I got training from the Lurp guys and plenty of weapons experience the last time I was on this road. That was about a week ago. I don't think more training will help me at this point."

"I'll take your word for it. We're deep in enemy territory now. If it looks like we are going to have enemy contact, the main thing is to listen carefully to what I have to tell you. Basically, it's this: keep alert, be prepared to move fast, and stay behind me or whichever of my guys you can see. Do your best to keep up. If you lose sight of us, get down on the ground and stay there. One of us will come and get you as soon as we can."

"If one of your guys comes to find us, how will we know he's a good guy?" Rafaela asked.

"He will be singing a quiet version of 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game.' It'll sound more like a bird than a human, so listen carefully if you hear any bird sounds." He demonstrated. "You may have to

announce yourself to him, so be careful. You won't want to announce yourself to the enemy, too. That's enough questions for now. We should be on the Lang Vei compound in about fifteen minutes. I count it as good news that we haven't had any trouble so far.

"I have to go back up front to help my driver find the compound. When the truck stops, look at me. If I hold my hand up with all my fingers out, then make a fist, get out the back of the truck fast and come around to the front so I can tell you which directions to move in. Got it?"

We both nodded.

Hack was true to his word; I estimated the time between our conference and the truck stopping at very close to fifteen minutes. The rain had increased, and the driver had buried us deep in some brush off the road. When Hack gave us the signal, we jumped out the back and ran around to the front with the three grunts who had been manning the heavy guns.

The driver jumped into the back. He would let us know by radio signal if Charlie came into the area. If worse came to worst, he would unlimber the machine guns and try to keep the path back to the truck clear for our return.

"The main building in this compound should be about fifty paces ahead," Hack told his men. "You three start moving in the direction I indicate with my flashlight. When you get to the building don't go in. Take a quick look around, and one of you come back and get me. If it looks clear, we will move up."

"Yessir."

Within a few minutes one of the men had returned. "Hey, cap. Looks clear to us. It is pretty quiet so far. We should all move up now."

"Okay. Rafaela. Aleck. Let's move."

The building was quiet as we approached. We stood back about twenty feet. The point man touched the door. It was unlocked. He pushed it open and stepped in, where he immediately appeared to trip and fall. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Down! Now!" Hack screamed. "Whoever is in there, we are Marines and US Army Special Forces and we are well-armed. My men and I will destroy this building and everything in it unless you identify yourselves right now."

A voice with a heavy foreign, possibly Vietnamese, accent came from within the building: "You are army?"

"Yes. Can my man speak?" "Yes. He speaks now."

"It looks okay to me, Cap," the point man said from the other side of the door. "More a misunderstanding than anything. It looks like there are two wounded men here. This guy sounds Hmong to me. He may be caring for these guys. They look pretty rough. You need to send Rafaela in here right now."

Rafaela spoke up. "I'm coming in now. Open the door for me." "Wait," Hack whispered. "I want to open that door. Aleck, you come with me. Stay close behind. If that guy is Hmong, you need to try to ID him. One of you guys needs to cover us and keep the doctor behind you. The other needs to go around behind the building and check it out."

In my opinion, time was of the essence. I decided not to wait. "Fres! Is that you?"

From inside the building, I heard, "Aleck Morse? Is that you? How'd you get here? That chopper that took you and Easterman out of here didn't come back. I figured you all crashed and were now dead."

“Nah. It takes a lot more than that to knock out a guy from Duluth. Long story. Hey. These army guys with me are still worried that we might be getting lured into a trap. Can you come out the door with your hands up? I’ll be just outside to greet you. There will be a lot of weaponry pointed your way when the door opens. Just be calm.”

“I trust you, Aleck. Did someone say Rafaela? If she’s with you tell her cousin Rafael is here. He is wounded and needs help right away.”

At that point Rafaela’s trauma-doctor cool collapsed. I heard a low moan behind me followed by deep, racking sobs while she tried to catch her breath and move toward the now open door that framed Fres with his hands up. She did not wait for any niceties. Hack moved out of her way.

“Where is my cousin!” she demanded of Fres. “I will take you to him,” he said.

“Aleck bring the rest of my gear! Right now! Hack! I may need a stretcher for both of these wounded men. I don’t know what I am getting into here, but I want to be ready to move them as quickly as possible back to the truck. I need sturdy stretchers that minimize the possibility of making their wounds worse. Can you handle that?”

Hack nodded. “My men and I will cut a couple of small trees that we can lash together. Fres—is that your name? Help the doctor get set with whatever she needs, then help me find something to lash the trees together, some rope or twine or string. Even vines from some of these trees will help.”

Fres showed us into a back room where the two wounded men lay. It was not immediately clear whether they were unconscious or dead. Rafaela went to her cousin and began hugging and kissing him while her tears dripped onto his dirty face and found their way through his ragged beard. At the same time, she was feeling for a pulse and other vital signs. She carefully removed the dirty bandages covering his wounds.

“Aleck,” she said, furiously wiping away tears and focusing up, “it may be impossible but search this building for any medicines or disinfectants, clean towels, and any source of water for cleaning these wounds. Have Fres help you look while he tries to find rope or string for the stretchers.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. First, if you know anything about first aid, please check the other man out and see if you can figure out what we need to do to get him ready to move to the truck.”

Fres spoke up. “He’s one of your recon team, Aleck. He took a bad blow to head. Knocked his helmet off and gave him a bad cut. He has been out since the firefight, but still breathing. He seems normal in any other way except being awake. Pulse and heart rate normal. Not much bleeding except for the head wound.”

The other man was Collin’s sharpshooter, Choi. “How in the hell did you get them here from the firefight?” I asked.

“I hid them until the battle ended and the last NVA soldiers left. Then I carried them here,” he replied.

Rafaela seemed overwhelmed by this man’s courage. “Thank you, Fres. I want to hug you and kiss you, but that will have to wait. You deserve a medal. Go ahead now with Aleck to look for medical supplies and rope. I’ll check the other man as soon as I can get my cousin stabilized and ready to move.”

Hack stuck his head in the door. “We need to get out of here fast. Make sure your wounded men are ready to move in five minutes. Got that?”

“Yes, I have it. I am working as fast as I can,” Rafaela replied.

Hack went back to help with building the two stretchers. When Rafaela said they were ready to move, Hack and his men took the stretchers into the building and then moved each of the men back to the truck. They lay the wounded onto some padding that had been brought in the truck for that purpose.

"This is going to be a rough ride," Hack said. "Stay low. This truck has some armor plating along the sides that should help protect you against small arms fire as long as you keep your head down and we keep moving. Don't raise your head unless we get stopped or I tell you to. If there are any NVA along the road with heavy weapons we may be out of luck. If Tommy needs any help with that Browning .50-cal, Aleck, be prepared to help him.

"If we are attacked by anybody with serious intent to take us out, we are all going to be busy. The main idea here is to protect the doctor and the two wounded men."

The driver backed up over the same short path that we plowed down when we first turned off the road. Tommy, the machine gunner, and I had a hard time keeping our heads down. We wanted to be the first ones to see if any problems in the form of hostile enemy showed themselves. Once the truck was back on the road, the driver threw it into a forward gear and jammed his foot on the gas. So far it looked like we hadn't attracted the attention of the NVA.

I began to worry as the truck kept picking up speed over the bombed out road. We were hitting some bad bumps, and the wounded men were getting bounced around. I certainly didn't want to have an accident because we were going too fast over bad roads. Rafaela was using her own body to cushion her cousin against the bumps, and I knew she was going to get badly beat up in the process. Her eyes caught mine and looked toward the driver. She was pleading to have the driver slow down.

"Hack!" I shouted. "Tell your driver to slow down! The bumps are killing these guys back here."

I remembered the driver telling me that this particular version of the truck would not go over forty miles per hour so I relaxed a little, but I still could not bring myself to keep my head down. I had to know what was going on around me; perhaps something or someone was hidden in the brush along the side of the road. Tommy's head was also on a swivel.

Hack motioned to the driver to slow down. He did, briefly, but then I heard some shots ring out simultaneously with a couple of pinging sounds on the sides of the truck. Somebody was shooting at us.

"Get down back there and stay down!" Hack yelled. "We are taking fire."

I had been trying to help Rafaela comfort her cousin while the other two GIs tried to protect Choi from too much banging around. Now that we were getting hit, both of them had to work to get the Browning .50 ready to return fire.

Rafaela was on her side with her arms and legs around her cousin. I had been on the opposite side facing her, our arms and legs occasionally entangled. In the pauses between bumps our eyes locked as we tried to prepare for the next jolt. When the next bump hit she shouted in pain then quickly bit her lip and looked away from me. Tears were streaming from her eyes. I heard a low moan build in her.

By now the two GIs had abandoned Choi as they worked to get their machine gun ready to return fire. Choi was bouncing around like a spastic marionette. Whatever his original injuries, Choi's bouncing was producing life-threatening injuries of its own.

I looked at Rafaela and nodded my head toward her. She nodded back at me. I went to Choi and, like Rafaela, wrapped my arms and legs around him. The bruises I had gained with my arms around the cousin were even more intense now as they were joined by new ones. With each bump I wanted to scream as loud as I was capable of, and I'm sure I did more than once.

The GIs had the Browning unlimbered, loaded, and aimed out the back of the truck, but no more shots were fired at us. After about ten more minutes on the road Hack told the driver to slow down. We were getting to the outer security perimeter at Khe San. Hack told Rafaela to check both wounded for wounds that might need some kind of emergency response beyond the standard protocol so that he could call in the trauma staff and tell them what to prepare for.

He had already alerted base ops to prepare for our arrival and not to shoot. "Clear our way to the trauma tent and give us an escort. We will approach at top speed with our headlights flashing SOS," he said into the radio.

Rafaela was hurt from all the pounding. I prayed none of her injuries were serious. I was feeling pretty rugged myself, but I felt I could still function. "Do you want me to take some notes while you examine these guys?" I asked.

Her mouth formed a rictus of grimace, quickly gone, as she acknowledged my question. Her voice was stressed as she answered. "Maybe you can help me with the instruments and the undressing."

After a few minutes she and I could report that no extraordinary procedures were required, but she did want to emphasize, again, that Rafael's wounds to his head, left shoulder, and leg did not appear to be life-threatening. However, his coma condition, and that of Choi since the earlier fire, were of great concern to her. She wanted a trauma specialist with the right experience in Khe San as soon as possible. If flight ops were possible any time there was a break in the weather, she asked that an emergency evac flight be initiated ASAP.

As soon as the trauma staff had Rafael and Choi out of the truck and into the trauma tent Rafaela appeared to pass out. I rushed to her side and bent toward her to see what was wrong. I whispered into her ear. "Rafaela, Rafaela. Talk to me." I waited. "Talk to me." There was no response.

I pressed my ear to her mouth. Her breathing appeared to be normal, if a little ragged. I pressed my hand under her shirt to feel for a heartbeat somewhere around her left breast. I felt her wrist for a pulse but was not sure of what I was feeling either around her breast or her wrist. I began to check her body for blood, or for any signs of bruising that could cause pain. Her head and face were bruised because of her attempts to cushion her cousin against the heavy bumping along Route 9. Her body might show signs of other trauma, but I did not feel competent to judge what I might find.

I carefully rolled her over but could not find anything obvious that would explain her condition. There was no blood on her clothes that told me she had a bleeding wound, but I was reluctant to undress her to check further. Two medics were waiting for her outside the truck, so I called to them to get a stretcher and help me get her into the trauma center.

I was beginning to feel a little faint myself. My own wounds from the earlier fire with the Lurp team were not close to being healed, and I probably had pulled some of the stitches in my leg and head wounds during this rescue mission.

When the two medics came back with two other GIs, I did what I could to help, but I knew I was seriously close to passing out. I moved aside and told them I might need their help when they were through moving Rafaela into the trauma tent. One of the medics yelled for another stretcher. I could see a vision of Dr. Castro in my mind's eye. I could imagine how pissed he was going to be about all this.

That is the last thing I remember.

I woke to Dr. Castro shining a bright light into my eye. I jerked my head away. "Where the hell am I? What the hell is going on?"

Chaos

Dr. Castro was obviously pissed. "Where do you think you are? You goddamn kids in this goddamn war. What the fuck do you think you, a goddamn wounded civilian under my care and a goddamn US Citizen on top of it all, were doing?!"

"Where is Rafaela?" I asked, calmly.

"She is in the operating theater getting checked out. She looks okay to me, but she is beat-up and bruised. You're next to go in there. What the fuck were you guys doing out there to get so banged up? Did you have a goddamn boxing match?"

"Didn't Bukowski say something to you about what we were doing?" I asked.

"Sure. He said you and Rafaela needed to identify and help some wounded guys that you both knew."

"Did he tell you where we were going?"

"No. Where did you go?"

"Gosh, doc, I don't know what is classified info and what is not. You'll have to ask Bukowski."

"Don't call me doc, you little twerp."

With that closing remark, Dr. Castro left the room.

Soon they rolled Rafaela out of the operating room. She asked them to stop by my cart. She reached out to my arm, then leaned toward me trying to kiss me on the cheek. Obviously, she was still in pain.

"Thank you for everything you did," she whispered. "You saved my cousin's life, and I want to repay you somehow. Talk to me later," she said as they rolled me into the operating theater.

Her hand and fingers slid across my arm, as though she didn't want to let go just yet. I wanted to look after her, but a sharp pain in my neck brought me back into the present moment.

"I am in love with this woman," I said to myself. "If I have my way, I will talk to her every day for the rest of my life."

END