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Flashback

by

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Abstract

Thousands of soldiers returned home from Vietnam on a moment’s notice: alone, friendless, and perceived as the antithesis of the “hero” status typically awarded those who fight for our country. Upon discharge, their inglorious reputation followed them from the front lines of battle—ducking mortar fire and machine-gun rounds, deep in the vast jungles of Vietnam—to their homes, and the unwelcome arms of the United States, only a few days later. The (suddenly) ex-soldiers were never allotted time for psychological decompression, deprogramming, or the infusion of reintegration strategies, in order to smooth their way toward re-entry into “normal” society—all of which as necessary components toward psychological recovery after months and months of suppressed emotions, and the necessary “dehumanization” of the enemy. Once home, few were interested in listening to the soldiers’ experiences, and, of those who did listen, many passed summary judgment on them, further alienating these veterans from the very country they had pledged to serve, even unto death. Therefore, countless Vietnam veterans retreated from this unforgiving society, entering into an impermeable state of “numbness” and continued terror from which they are—even years later—unable, or have no desire, to escape.

Inspired by the latter condition, and in a similar vein to The Things They Carried, I wrote Flashback in order to engage what is still quite a controversial perception of the Vietnam War: the atrocities that the soldiers were forced to carry out in the name of “orders” and for survival, as well as the psychological damage that the soldiers experienced as a result of those actions. Thus, Flashback opens on a scene in which Jackson Taylor, an American Vietnam veteran, is holding a man and wife hostage inside a run-down, mobile-home trailer while the local police and SWAT gather outside in an effort to negotiate the release of his captives. In between phone
communication with the negotiator outside, as well as limited conversations with his captives regarding the war, Jackson experiences memories, flashbacks, and even dreams and nightmares about his time “in country.” Jackson wants his hostages to understand the severity of the effects of war on the soldiers, but, like most of the men who fought in Vietnam, he finds it nearly impossible to express to “civilians” all that he saw and all that he did there without opening old wounds, or triggering emotional outbursts. Jackson’s struggle to communicate also demonstrates his fear of exposing himself to the very real possibility of inciting judgment from his captives about his role in the war—especially since the memories of negative civilian reception, upon the soldiers’ return to the United States, are still quite fresh in his mind.

Jackson suffers from acute PTSD, to the extent that he is putting others in physical danger. The “fall-out” of the Vietnam War does not only affect the soldiers, however. It also impacts their families, friends, and/or loved ones. The narrative, then, explores Jackson’s perspective, but it also emphasizes the experiences that his wife and child endured alongside his own—delineating the scope of damage that war can inflict on not only the bodies of soldiers, but on their psyches, and on their loved-ones’ psychological and physical well-being, as well. Even Jackson’s hostages are not impervious to the effects of Vietnam, as one recalls its affects on his older brother, and the other on her ex-husband.

Through Jackson’s fictive character, I attempt to connect the “everyday Joe” (the reader) with veteran soldiers—whether they served in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraq, or Afghanistan—in order to create a virtual dialogue in place of an often impossible conversation with “live” veterans, due to their PTSD, which leads to their unwillingness to share their trauma with those who “weren’t there.” By way of flashbacks and memories—loaded with tension, action, and revelation—as well as the conversation between Jackson and his hostages, the
narrative not only seeks to entertain, but it also generates that civilian/veteran connection, and it serves to enlighten the reader in order for him or her to better understand the men and women who serve and have served our country. *Flashback* is geared toward providing the impetus some are looking for to facilitate aid, respect, and honor for their grandfathers, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, spouses, friends, and even those they don’t know who have served in some branch of the United States Armed Forces—those who suffer from PTSD, and even those who don’t. At the very least, perhaps Jackson’s story may serve as a conversation piece, or as a sort of think piece, to inspire, in the reader, thoughtful reflection, empathy, and sensibility toward the lone soldier struggling to make his or her way back to “normalcy,” long after leaving the bush, and the war, behind.
Reading List and General Influences


Flashback
by Jillynne M. Jensen

Airborne, Ranger, C.I.B.
Nobody’s Gonna Fuck With Me

If I Die In The Combat Zone
Box Me Up And Ship Me Home

Fold My Arms Across My Chest
Tell My Folks I Done My Best

Place A Bible In My Hand
For My Trip To The Promised Land
—Military Marching Cadence (Unknown)

And if I ever lose my eyes
If my colors all run dry;
Yes, if I ever lose my eyes—Oh, if...
I won’t have to cry no more.

And if I ever lose my legs
I won’t moan and I won’t beg.
Oh, if I ever lose my legs—Oh if...
I won’t have to walk no more.

Yes, I’m being followed by a moon shadow;
Moon shadow, moon shadow.
—Moonshadow (Cat Stevens)

Chapter 1

The shadows in the room were blending together. Squeezing through a narrow gap in the window’s closed drapes, the afternoon sunlight softened with the approach of dusk while Jackson Taylor inserted a fresh magazine into his 9-mm Glock and pulled the slide back to chamber a new round. A loud, ragged sigh spilled from his lips. He backed against an inner wall and slid down into what his ex-wife used to call his “kimchi squat”—named after the traditional crouch of her Korean gardener whenever he weeded her enormous vegetable garden. He hated that term. Or he hated her. Six one way, half a dozen another.
Scratching an old puckered scar beneath a half-inch buzz-cut, Jackson examined the carnage he had created. Scattered on the floor and on top of the coffee table and the sofa, the gleaming brass of spent shells winked back at him like partners in crime, and bright spatters of fresh blood sealed the lock on his future jail cell. Or his coffin lid.

He lit a Marlboro and closed his eyes, relishing the smoke that burned into his lungs. His head fell forward onto his chest and his forearms flopped onto his knees—the cigarette dangling between two fingers of one hand, and the Glock sagging from the other. God, he was tired! If only he’d been able to make them understand, there wouldn’t be one of Phoenix’s finest bleeding all over his living-room carpet. Jackson had seen the deputies’ shadows on the roof through the living-room skylight. He’d yelled at them to back off, channeling a volley of warning shots into the ceiling. But they hadn’t backed off, and when the red beam of a laser sight had shined into his retina, he’d pulled the trigger of his ’nine, one more time, and the corpse of one deputy fell through the skylight. An hour ago, as a result of that fiasco, the police had brought in the SWAT team, and his phone had been ringing ever since—the negotiator anxious to parley over a resolution in order to “avoid more bloodshed.”

Voices. There were the voices. And bodies, and explosions, and grenades. The thump of the rocket launcher, the blast of its concussion knocking him from his feet, and the thwok-thwok of helicopter blades slicing through the air, creating a vacuum in his ears that almost made them bleed—all clamoring through his head like he was still in the bush. There, in the fog of his mind, he was still dodging mortars and wondering which civilian was safe and which one wasn’t.

The voices reverberated again. Crammed somewhere between his hippocampus and his frontal lobe, they echoed like ghosts screaming into a canyon.

The phone squawked. He heaved another sigh, and pressed “TALK.”
“Mr. Taylor—”

“Nothing has changed, Talbot,” Jackson said, in a weary tone. “Your man is dead. And there was nothing I could do about it. Your guys had a bead on me, and this one paid the price. You shouldn’t have put them on the roof.”

“How are the Petersons?”

“Resting,” Jackson said. He stood, shook the kinks out of his legs, and pointed the barrel of the Glock toward the ceiling before he crunched his way over glass and shells to peer into the first bedroom down the long, narrow hall. Two stout figures curled together on his daughter’s old bed, holding each other and waiting to see what he would do next. It was a queen, but it might as well have been a twin for all the space it offered the Petersons. They lay unmoving except for the rise and fall of their tremendous chests and the blink of their terrified eyes.

“Mr. Taylor, we need to get them out of there.” Talbot’s tinny voice squeaked from the earpiece. “Think of the blood-loss, man. It’s going to kill Mr. Peterson. And they have children—”

“I know all that.”

Jackson eyed Mr. Peterson. He was struggling to keep his eyes open, the blood-loss clearly beginning to affect his ability to stay awake.

“What can we do to get those innocent people out of there, Jackson?”

“Don’t mind-fuck me, Talbot,” Jackson said.

“No, no. I’m not trying to do that.”

“Yeah. You are,” Jackson sighed, again. “No one’s innocent, Chief. Not you, not me, and certainly not the Petersons.”

“Why? What did they do to deserve this?”
“They were peddling God like Hershey’s candy, you little shit! What else? They’re as screwed up as everyone else in the world. You can’t sell God to people, Talbot. And you can’t change what is.”

Mrs. Peterson flinched and squeezed her eyes shut, pushing her face deeper into the pillow beneath her head. Mr. Peterson patted her arm and stared hard at Jackson before closing his own eyes.

“You’re right, Jackson. You can’t change what ‘is.’ But you can make choices about the future. You can change what comes. You can send the Pet Saturns out, and you can let us help you. Whatever you’ve been through—”

“Shut the fuck up! You have no idea, Talbot. You go home to your family every night, play checkers with the kids, watch a little TV, and serve it to the wife for ten minutes before laying your greasy head on your satin pillows ’cause you know she’ll take care of the stains by the time you lie down again. You fall asleep dreaming of vacations on white sandy beaches, for chrissakes. You have no idea what it’s like to suffer.”

“And the Peterssons, Jackson? They have no idea about suffering?”

Sweat trickled into Jackson’s eyes and he swiped at it with the back of his hand. He was talking to a wall and he knew it. Talbot would never get it. There was about as much chance of Talbot “getting it” as Jackson walking out of there alive.

The Peterssons. They might get it after today. Jackson knew what they were about, even if they didn’t. Fat fucks living the high life, eating like kings and wearing diamonds—driving Beamers and pretending to do “God’s work” while they went door-to-door asking for money, and claiming it was all for God. What did they do with their money? What did they spend it on? And they had the nerve to judge him—a graying vet with half a leg, living in a mobile home
trailer with silver paint peeling from warped metal siding. And they had the nerve to park their brand-new, shiny BMW behind his old rotting pick-up truck, hunched on a crumbling asphalt driveway with busted tie rods and a leaky radiator, and ask him for money! The irony was comical.

Jackson took a deep breath.

“Not yet,” he said.

He pressed “END.”

He knew that Talbot was setting up sharp-shooters, positioning them around the trailer so that Jackson had no hope for escape. They would wait there behind mirrored sunglasses and black uniforms, sweat beading their foreheads in the heat of the Phoenix sun—their rifles poised and still, and trained on every window and both doors. Waiting for Talbot’s signal.

Jackson’s eyes squeezed shut against a fresh set of images forming in his mind, carrying him back to Da Nang. The images wouldn’t go away.

Vietnamese hookers called out to him from parked siclos, some of them running to catch up with him to press their tiny little bodies into his.

_You want boom-boom, G.I._?

He shook his head, with a smile, and continued through the marketplace, grinning at children peddling their wares.

_Cigarettes, G.I.? Whiskey? I have whiskey for strong G.I. You buy?_

Jackson nodded and reached into his pocket while a young boy pulled an amber bottle from a cardboard box balanced on his hip.

_One bottle._
He headed back toward the American base, brushing other peddlers’ hands from his uniform and promising he would “buy” tomorrow. When he neared the gate, a young girl approached him. Her box, suspended by a strip of cloth around her neck, reminded him of the American cigarette girls of World War II.

*You want smoke? I got smoke. You buy, G.I.*

Jackson looked at the streaks of grime tracking down the little girl’s cheeks. His heart softened, as it almost always did.

*Yes. I buy, Tee-Tee.*

Jackson pulled several American bills from his money clip, glimpsing her gaunt little face while he counted it out to her. Instead of the customary grin, the tiny thing nodded, tossing quick glances over her shoulder with an impatient bounce while she held out a carton of Pall Malls in her little doll’s hand. Something seemed strange—not quite right. Their eyes met over the carton when she thrust it higher into the air at him.

All at once, the girl’s eyes widened and she dropped the carton and turned to leave. Jackson remembered each of the next two seconds as if watching it on a jerky screen in slow-motion. His foot lashed out, sweeping through the air like a Huey rotor, and connected with the carton at the same time it exploded—disintegrating into the air along with the lower half of his leg and the back of the little girl’s head.

He screamed, gazing in sudden shock at the gush of blood pulsing from where his lower leg had been, and then at the figure crumpled into a blackened ball amidst a litter of broken glass, cigarettes, and candy. G.I.s and nurses flew from the hootches to his side. Jackson pointed at the little girl.

*Is she okay?*
The little gook is dead, Lieutenant. She tried to kill you, man!

The acrid smell of burning flesh, singed hair, and whiskey stung Jackson’s nostrils as if he still lay prostrate in that hot, dusty street of Da Nang. His face twisted and his eyes squeezed shut before he came back to his hostages and the mobile home, baking in the desert sun. He gulped huge breaths of air, thick with the smell of blood. He tried to shake the image of the VC child from his mind. The residual montage of the back of her skull—shattered and black—coalesced with the faces of peasants and G.I.s, and they all faded into a misty crimson fog. He opened his eyes and looked at the Petkers on the bed.

“Wakey, wakey,” he said.

Mr. Peterson groaned and his eyes blinked open, then squeezed shut when sweat pooled into them from where it had collected in the folds of his face. He pushed himself up in increments, as if jacking up a car. Grunting, he shifted to a sitting position and rubbed his eyes. Jackson eyed the make-shift bandage wrapped around Mr. Peterson’s thigh. The color had faded to a rusty brown, the center no longer seeping.

The wife stirred and whimpered and Mr. Peterson patted her arm, again. The woman made no move to rise, but turned her head on the pillow to look at Jackson, her ample lips quivering.

“Rested a little, I trust?” Jackson said.

The Petkers were quiet.

“We have some things to talk about before I leave you today. If you want to leave this piece-of-shit trailer alive, you’ll cooperate, capisce?”

They nodded—Mrs. Peterson’s face rustling against the linen pillow case with each bob.
“Good. And now,” Jackson said, looking hard at Mr. Peterson, “I have some questions. If you answer with anything less than complete honesty, I will shoot you in the gut and dig the bullet out with my knife. And then I’ll feed it to your wife while I gut her like a pig. Are we all on the same page, here?”

More nodding.

Mrs. Peterson shivered.

“First question. How many kids ya’ll have?”

“T-two,” Mr. Peterson croaked.

“They out of the house?”

Mr. Peterson nodded. “College.”

“Good for them, good for them. How is—now you remember, you promised to answer honestly. How is your relationship with them? Do you talk every day? Every weekend?”

“N-no. We talk—we don’t talk often.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on, Mr. Peterson. I think you do know.” Jackson winked.

“Our daughter is going to school in Hawaii. It’s expensive.”

“And?”

“And our son is attending community college.”

“You don’t like that, much, do you? Is he pulling good grades?”

Mr. Peterson was silent.

Jackson’s brow arched. “Hmmm?”

“He’s being expelled.”
“Wow. That one hurt, didn’t it? He’s kind of disappointing, isn’t he, that son of yours? What happened?”

“He was caught cheating.”

“Is he stupid, your son? Does he have to cheat to get by?”

“No. He’s very intelligent.”

“But?” Jackson said. He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms, the Glock resting on his bicep in silent warning.

“He doesn’t like to follow the rules,” Mr. Peterson said. He took a deep breath, exhalating through his nose. “He’s always been in trouble. From the time he was small.”

“You don’t like him very much.”

“He’s my son.”

“Irrelevant. You wanted him to go to an Ivy-League school, didn’t you? Follow in the old man’s footsteps?”

“I went to MIT.”

“Close enough. Point is, he hasn’t lived up to what you expected, right? He’s a little shit, bucking against the system. Sometimes wonder if he can possibly be related to you, huh? You want to smash his head into the wall and tell him to wake up, don’t you?”

“I never hit my children.”

“Of course you don’t. But you want to. And that scares the hell out of you, doesn’t it? Don’t worry, Peterson. Your secret’s safe with me. Well—and the Missus.” Jackson nodded to Peterson’s wife, who remained silent, tears rolling across one rounded cheek and onto the pillow.

“Why does it matter?” she said, finally, her head coming off the pillow for the first time that afternoon. She pushed herself up into a sitting position next to Peterson and interlaced his
substantial fingers with her own. “Why do you care?”

“I ask the questions here, Mrs. Peterson. But, since you ask—it matters because we’re the same, the three of us. We expect certain things from people, but they disappoint us time and again, don’t they? But you. You’ve become one of them. One of those lying, disappointing people. You hate your kids, and you’ve sold out, and you’ve done it in the name of God.”

Peterson shook his head. “We don’t hate—”

“Shut your pie-hole!” Jackson roared. He crossed the room in two strides, and struck Peterson’s head with the pistol.

Mrs. Peterson screamed. Her husband cried out and slapped a hand over a new wound on his temple—blood percolating between his fingers.

“I told you. No lying,” Jackson said.

The phone rang in Jackson’s hand.

“Mr. Taylor? Jackson? What the hell’s happening in there?” Talbot squalled from the handset. “Who’s screaming?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Peterson are learning a little bit about suffering.”

Chapter 2

It was dark. Jackson peeked from behind a curtained window, situated in the wall of the hallway outside his daughter’s old room, and glared at the flashing lights from the crowd of police cars and SWAT vehicles parked outside the trailer. The entire staging area was illuminated by a flood light mounted on one of the SWAT vans behind the men. Jackson couldn’t see any faces. He could only make out the helmeted silhouettes of the SWAT team huddling around the negotiator. Probably discussing a more intense plan of action, Jackson
thought, and he released the curtain and peered back down the darkened hallway toward the living room. The squad cars’ alternating blue and red lights emanated, in weak flashes, through the broken skylight where the dying cop had fallen through. In short, disturbing pulses, the muted light washed the corpse below in a sick, purplish hue and flickered off the tiny panes of broken glass littering the man’s jacket.

Jackson blinked hard, and turned back to his captives.

He had no idea what he was going to do with the Petersons. Mrs. Peterson had cried herself to sleep, too exhausted from the day’s activity to remain conscious any longer. Mr. Peterson leaned into a pillow against the wall, fighting to keep his eyes open. He held a fresh towel pressed against his temple, but the flow of blood had long since abated. Maybe, he hadn’t noticed. Jackson leaned against the wall, beneath the window, and slid downward until he was sitting on the floor. He grimaced when the prosthetic leg pinched the skin just under his kneecap, and he rubbed at the seam where the two came together. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

It was eleven in the morning and he sat at a small table in a Saigon pub, eying the dancers on the stage and swirling a tumbler of whiskey dangling from his fingers. The girls swung around fixed poles and gyrated to American rock music piping out of tinny speakers embedded in the ceiling. Every so often, they would wiggle into the laps of whistling enlisted men who stuffed bills into their scant clothing and groped what they could before the girls bounced away with a giggle and a smile. The place was teeming with American soldiers and Vietnamese waiters and dancers.

The front door banged open and Jackson squinted through a thick haze of tobacco smoke
at a small group of young women blustering in. They were dressed in neat, American-style jumper dresses in varying colors. Their hair was either cut short, or flipped, or coiled in a modern American up-sweep, which they patted into place before shuffling into the bar wearing high-heeled shoes and short-strapped purses that hung off straight, narrow shoulders, or handbags clutched delicately in their tiny polished fingers. If not for the black of their hair and the pretty slant of their eyes, Jackson might have thought he was in an American nightclub.

They were the *boom-boom* girls. The hookers. None of them over twenty and most around fifteen or sixteen, he guessed. They smiled and giggled and touched each other’s arms, like girls at a school social. But then it was down to business and they moved into the crowd with urgent purpose. One by one, they sat down at separate tables of two or three men and flirted, touched, and smiled until one of the men inevitably got up and left with them.

Jackson’s attention returned to his drink, and he swallowed the last of it in a gulp. Immediately, a waitress appeared and took up his empty glass.

*More?*

Before he could answer, one of the hookers sat down beside him.

*You want boom-boom, G.I.?*

He shook his head.

*You buy drink, we talk.*

Jackson sighed and nodded to the waitress, who scurried away with a sneer. Although they tried to get their clients to buy them drinks, the hookers were bad for the wait staff’s tips, for they soon drew the clients away to transact their own business in private.

The young woman asked him again.

*You want boom-boom, G.I.?*
Jackson frowned at her. She was pretty, maybe seventeen or eighteen, her hair swept up onto the back of her head in a high, tight coiffure, and her eyes like dark almonds.

*I’m Jackson. Jack-son.*

She repeated the name several times, turning her tongue to form the vowels, but the “ck” escaped her.

*Jah-san.*

Close enough. He pointed at her.

*Hoa.*

Flower. Of course. Jackson looked at her, his eyes narrowing. He never went to hookers. Too much risk of disease. But Hoa was lovely and he was lonely, and he needed the company of a woman—a soft touch, a delicate smell—if only for a little while. He asked her how much for a week.

She brightened.

*Nine for a day. Forty a week.*

The price was high, but she could ask it. Hoa spoke a little English, a highly-prized commodity in a hooker, since conversation was a big part of the soldier’s need for feminine companionship. They agreed on the terms and she rose, waiting for him to escort her from the bar.

Jackson didn’t take her to his quarters, right away. Instead, he took her to a restaurant where they drank tea and plum wine. He leaned back in his chair and listened to her silvery voice, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth while he watched her tongue bounce behind perfect white teeth and pretty, bowtie lips. God, she was lovely!

Hoa talked about her family, mostly. She was the first daughter of a farmer living in a
small village on the outskirts of Tam Ky, a town in the Quang Tin Province, just south of Da Nang. She’d lived a simple life in the rice paddies, and she’d been happy, and she’d expected to grow old surrounded by her loved ones and a handful of friends. But when American Forces engaged the North Vietnamese Army there, the family farm was destroyed and her father killed. At sixteen, Hoa fled with her mother and two sisters, a little over 530 miles southwest to Saigon, to live with Hoa’s aunt, Lan. But Lan’s husband had been killed in a skirmish up north, not long before their arrival. In absence of the military stipends and farming proceeds from the only male providers in the family, the surviving women struggled to make ends meet by whatever means they could find.

Hoa’s humble upbringing, and a little luck, garnered her a position, almost right away, as a domestic in a wealthy household. But it was short-lived. Her employer was a corpulent, domineering man with an eye for young girls, and before long, Hoa was dismissed by the matron of the house who insisted—amid screeches and hurled objects—that Hoa was a “shameful hussy” trying to seduce her husband. Hoa searched in vain for respectable work, her extended family suffering greatly from the absence of her monetary contribution. The English she’d learned while with the wealthy family was quite valuable, but times were very hard and positions like the one she’d recently left were nearly impossible to find. Finally, out of desperation, Hoa hired herself out as a prostitute.

Jackson was only her third client, she admitted, and a blush brightened her cheeks with the humiliating revelation. Jackson lifted her chin with the crook of his finger and smiled when her eyes met his. He brushed the back of his hand along the taut, creamy surface of her cheek, with a sigh, and leaned forward and kissed her across the table. Her lips tasted like the sweet plum wine, and from her hair wafted the fragrance of fresh gardenias. He closed his eyes,
relishing her scent, before settling back into his chair.

They ate, and then they talked into the afternoon until she quieted and looked at him expectantly. He wasn’t ready to do what he knew she expected him to do.

Let’s take a walk.

The day was warm and muggy, but Jackson strolled with his hand on the small of her back, stopping here and there to peek into shop windows—Hoa delighted with the wares displayed there. She pointed at this and that fashion, clasping his hand, and Jackson bought her trinkets and candy. They explored the city, moving through the crowds like courting lovers, nodding to old, stooped ladies and buying goods from ragged children. The mood was light, her hand was warm and tiny in his, and Jackson didn’t want the afternoon to end.

When she’d been with him for over three weeks, Jackson rented a small apartment for her. Glowing, she moved her things, and her mother and sisters, into the modest tenement and took on the task of setting it up in a modern, American style—decorating it in a way she thought would be pleasing to her “benefactor.” Two months later, Hoa told him she was pregnant and Jackson asked her to marry him. She agreed, and they held a small ceremony to solemnize the union.

Four days later, she was dead. Witnessed by a boy hiding nearby, Hoa was killed on her way into the Cu Chi district, to visit another aunt, when she fell through a trap door into a hidden tunnel beneath the ground. Jackson wasn’t permitted to recover her body.

“What are you going to do with us?” Mr. Peterson said.

Jackson started, and looked hard at Peterson. He tried to clear his mind. He could still remember the scent of Hoa’s perfume when she’d embraced him at the door of their apartment
that morning. The day she died. She had promised she would return before nightfall, and he’d given her some chocolate to take to one of her aunts. Auntie Tien was known for her sweet tooth, and she hadn’t minded taking the candy as long as it was Hoa who’d given it to her.

“Let me ask you something,” Jackson said, ignoring the question.

Peterson said nothing. His wife came awake beside him and he helped her to sit up.

“You know anyone from Vietnam? Old folks, I mean,” Jackson continued.

Peterson shook his head. “Not really.”

Mrs. Peterson rubbed at her eyes, smearing black streaks from her mascara into the puffy mounds beneath them. Frowning at Jackson, she tucked a handful of stray curls behind her ears and settled her head onto her husband’s shoulder.

“They’re a funny lot,” Jackson said, looking away. “Especially those from Central and South Vietnam. I tried to give my wife’s aunt a chocolate, the day we were married. Can you believe, she threw that thing back at me like I’d tossed her a grenade? I guess some folks back then just didn’t appreciate Americans all that much. You should have seen her face, though, when my wife’s mother took one. Her head liked to have exploded. I mean, Aunt Tien went entirely purple—like her sister was the worst kind of traitor there ever was.”

The phone rang. Jackson sighed and answered it. “Yeah.”

“It’s coming on ten-thirty, Jackson,” Talbot said. “What are you going to do? What do you want?”

“You’re waiting for a list of demands?”

“If that’ll help get the Petkersons out of there—then, yes.”

“You’re really predictable, Talbot.”

“Well you tell me, then, Jackson. Why are we here?”
“I don’t really care why you’re here. As for us, the Petersons and I have a few things to hash out before…”

Talbot waited for a moment, and then he said, “Before what, Jackson?”

Jackson looked up at the ceiling, and didn’t answer. There was another long pause and Jackson could hear Talbot’s hand cup the receiver, his voice muted while he spoke to someone else.

And then a familiar voice came on the line.

“Daddy?”

Shit. That son-of-a-bitch.

Jackson dropped the phone from his ear, clambered to his feet, and parted the curtains. Tall and blonde, his daughter stood in the road, holding Talbot’s phone up to her ear. A second spotlight had been trained on her along with a handful of SWAT flanking her. Jackson swept the curtain back into place with a violent jerk and backed up against the wall with a growl. After a moment, he heaved a sigh and put the receiver back to his ear.

“Janis?” he said.

“Daddy?” she said, again. “What are you doing in there?”

“Never mind, Janis. What are you doing here?”

“Jesus, Daddy. They called me. What else do I do when someone calls me in the middle of the night and says my dad is keeping hostages?”

“I’m just talking to some people that stopped by, honey.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “Daddy, they said you shot some people.”

Christ. She was crying.

“I had to, sugar,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “The guy was going to shoot me. I didn’t
have a choice.”

“Of course you had a choice. And what about Mr. Peterson? You shot him, too. You should never have kidnapped those people in the first place, Dad. What were you thinking? You always do this. You bring everybody into the war. Into your war. You’ve got to stop. You’ve got to let it go. And you need to let Bob and Sheila go, too. Just let them go and let these people help you, okay?”

Jackson’s brows furrowed. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m really sorry they pulled you into this. I need to talk to Talbot. Could you put him back on the phone, please?”

“Yes,” Janis said, resignedly. “Okay, Daddy. Please just do what they say, alright? I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I love you, Janis.”

Janis said nothing for a moment, and then exhaled. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

Talbot came on the line. “Jackson,” he said.

Jackson could hear Janis weeping in the background.

“Bastard!” Jackson thundered. “That was a bullshit move, Talbot, using my daughter like that. Did you coach her to say the Peterson’s names? That is bullshit, man. You made my daughter cry, dammit!”

Jackson panted into the phone, his grip tightening and his knuckles growing whiter.

“No, I think you made her cry, Jackson,” Talbot replied. “Come on, it’s time you let Bob and Sheila go home.”

“Are you really this stupid? You trying to make them more familiar to me, Talbot? Make them more human, so I feel bad about hurting them? Nice try, but it won’t work. I have no compunctions about doing what I have to do.”
“What is it you ‘have to do,’ Jackson?”

“I have to make it all worth it.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“I know, Talbot. That’s why we’re here.”

Chapter 3

“Do you know anyone who served in Vietnam, Peterson?” Jackson asked, resuming his position on the floor.

Peterson nodded.

“Someone related to you?”

Another nod.

“Well? Who?”

“My brother,” Peterson croaked.

“Did he talk about it, much?”

Peterson shook his head. “Not really.”

“‘Not really.’ So,” Jackson pushed, “he said something. Come on, don’t make me drag it out of you.”

Peterson thought, for a moment, and shrugged. “He told me I should shut up, all the time,” he said. “And to stop sniveling. He said that I didn’t know my ass from a foxhole, and that if I wanted to know pain, I should go ‘in country,’ for awhile—see what pain really is. The rest was pretty much the same. He never told me what went on, or what he did over there. He just said I was ignorant of the ‘real world.’”

“You don’t like him, much, do you?”
“He’s alright. Keeps to himself, mostly. I’m a little afraid of him, I guess. Even now.”

“That’s good. It’s good to be afraid of him. He’s seen more than some, and done more than most. And he could rip your dick off before you even knew it was hanging out,” Jackson said. He looked at a strip of flowered wallpaper peeling off the paneling behind Peterson’s head—his thoughts drifting somewhere else.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Peterson said, the towel finally coming down off his face. He looked at Jackson and his face reddened. “I’ve lived most of my life in fear of my brother. In fear of his temper. Why should I have to walk on egg shells around Jerry when my dad was in a war, too? Dad never hit me, or got drunk and blamed it on the war, or the government. But Jerry is always getting high—or drunk—and shaking his fist at the world. Threatening it. Threatening me. It isn’t my fault he was there, and it isn’t my fault that I wasn’t. Why can’t he just live his life, like everybody else? What makes him so much worse off than our father was when he came home?”

Mrs. Peterson squeezed his hand, patting it with the other and keeping a baleful, but watchful, eye on Jackson.

Jackson’s brow arched. There was a latent anger boiling up inside of Peterson. Anger maybe he didn’t even know was there, or hadn’t vocalized, until now. His brazen diatribe in his current situation was evidence of that. But he wasn’t saying anything new. Jackson had heard it all before. From his daughter, mostly. He remembered many conversations ending in slamming doors, and “Fuck you, Dad. Get over it.” He understood it, but it pissed him off then, and it pissed him off now.

“You don’t know what he went through, Peterson. It was—”

“I know. It was hell.” A tinge of sarcasm crept into Peterson’s voice. “I’ve heard it a
hundred times, if I’ve heard it once. But I only heard it from Jerry. Didn’t they call World War Two ‘the war to end all wars?’ Yet, my father never said a word about the ‘fucked-up government.’ Never beat me over the head with it, day in and day out. Never used it as an excuse to screw up. Never—”

“Careful, Peterson,” Jackson warned. “You might say something you’ll regret. And it was World War One that was considered ‘the war to end all wars,’ not World War Two. Anyway, you don’t know what you’re talking about. You think you do because you compare the two people you know who fought in different wars. They weren’t the same in a lot of respects, those wars. And your dad and your brother are two different people, dealing with their wars in two different ways.”

“War is war. There’s killing, and there’s dying, and there’s coming home from that. What else is there?”

Jackson shook his head. Peterson didn’t get it. The killing of soldiers was rough. And seeing your buddies blown up was even worse. There was no denying the ramifications of that. But you couldn’t discount the peripheral shit—the shit that didn’t involve soldiers killing soldiers. That, added to the rest, was the crux of what destroyed a man inside. But how do you tell a guy about that other stuff without him judging you? How do you make him see? A guy who wasn’t there, who hadn’t lived it first hand?

“What was your brother like before he went in?” Jackson probed.

“I don’t know. Like any other older brother, I guess. Jerry was nicer to me then, even when he was picking on me. We had each other’s back, you know? And he used to take me fishing all the time. During the summer, we’d stay at the lake for hours in his old homemade boat, shooting the shit and trolling for trout.” Peterson paused, and snickered. “We christened
that boat the morning we first put it in the water at Lake Pleasant. He named it *Knot-a-Yacht.*

With a ‘k.’ He thought he was pretty clever. But I liked his sense of humor, then. It didn’t have the bitter irony that it does, now.”

Jackson smirked. “I’ll lay a bet that your dad was different, too, before he went to war. And I’ll bet he was affected a lot more than you think.”

Jackson thought about the kind of man he was before he’d enlisted. He’d been young, just eighteen. Hell, he’d only had his first woman just a few months before walking into the recruiter’s office. The same girl who’d kissed him full on the mouth in front of his mother the day he’d said goodbye to them all. Cheryl. That was her name. He’d told her he would write and that he’d marry her when he got back—have kids.

A boy like him went into the service with a load of romantic ideas in his head about going to battle. Thought of himself as coming out a hero, saving the day, and all that. But then he saw things and did things over there that he wanted to forget. *Tried* to forget. And instead of forgetting, he managed only to remember it—every day—for the rest of his life. He’d try to stuff it way back in his mind, as if somehow that would make it disappear. But it wouldn’t disappear. It never went away. It sat in the back of his throat and threatened to choke him every time he swallowed.

“Maybe he was,” Peterson said. “But he didn’t take it out on his family, like Jerry did.”

Peterson was certainly right about that. Sometimes family suffered the fall-out when a soldier came home. And that wasn’t restricted only to Vietnam vets. Pretty much all soldiers, from all the wars, had some kind of monster inside to deal with. Haunting memories of things he’d done, or horrors he’d seen. Some handled it quietly, some didn’t. And everybody dealt with different levels of shit in different ways. There was no real formula for figuring out why some
guys could handle it and some couldn’t. And just because a guy didn’t show his pain on the outside, it didn’t mean he wasn’t feeling it on the inside. But how could Jackson make people like Mr. and Mrs. Peterson understand all that?

“Yeah. I guess he had a different way of dealing with it.” It was all Jackson could say.

Peterson leaned his head back onto the wall and closed his eyes. Mrs. Peterson’s, while still locked on their captor, were half-lidded and red. She remained mute in her position on Peterson’s shoulder, allowing the conversation to go on around her without offering any opinion, but Jackson figured that this was probably not normally the case. She looked as if she could hold her own in a battle of wits. He could almost imagine the shriek of her voice in a verbal confrontation, just by the violent expression he sometimes saw on her face. But it was fleeting, something that she tried to hide the instant he caught her eye. Perhaps fear had stifled her tongue, for the moment.

Jackson’s thoughts drifted to Janis. Named after Janis Joplin—his wife’s favorite vocal artist—his daughter, from the start, had been a glimmer of sunshine in the darkness inside his head. She had certainly been through her share of craziness, though, when it came to Jackson’s struggle with the effects of the war. He couldn’t even count how many Christmas plays he’d missed for fear of the crowd triggering an outburst, or how many overnights she had spent at a friend’s house just so she could sleep a whole night without being awakened by his nightmare-induced, midnight screaming sessions. He remembered the after-effects of many arguments with her mother, when Janis would end up huddled in a corner of her closet and her mother in tears in the kitchen while Jackson locked himself in the study and cried over old war photographs. There were hundreds of those scenes and he was sure that, like him, Janis could recall each one in detail.
Jackson rubbed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. Poor Janis. There was a lot to regret.

Jackson scrambled to his knees, in the dark, and he reached for the throat of his assailant and squeezed. Someone screeched.

*Let go of her, Jackson! It’s only Janis. Wake up!*

Jackson heard the words, but he couldn’t understand them. The incongruous tone seemed to be coming from Tripp, who was glaring at him from behind a towering Kapok tree. The VC soldier between Jackson’s knees was struggling, but Jackson was much stronger, and it was only a matter of time before the man succumbed to the tightening grip on his neck.

*Jackson! Stop!*

Tripp was suddenly there, trying to wrench Jackson’s hands from around the enemy’s neck. Jackson pushed him away, scowling, and then gawked when his best friend’s ruddy face metamorphosed into soft, feminine features, framed by golden curls. The dim jungle dissipated like vanishing tendrils of fog, and was replaced by the soft white light of his bedroom lamp.

*Lo?*

Jackson shook his head, recognizing his wife, and then looked down into the terrified face of his eight-year-old daughter. His eyes widened and shifted further downward to his hands. One of them gripped his daughter’s shoulder and the other squeezed the neck of a stuffed bear in her arms. Horrified, he cried out, releasing both. He rolled off the bed at the same time Janis scrambled up into the arms of her mother and buried her face against Lori’s neck. Jackson stood there, balancing on his good leg, his lungs heaving, sweat stinging his eyes, and stared back at his petrified family huddling together on the far side of the bed.
I’m sorry. Oh, my God, I’m so sorry.

Trembling, Jackson grabbed his crutches from against the night stand and staggered out of the bedroom to the kitchen down the hall. Once inside, he leaned against the sink, opened the tap, and dunked his head under a rush of cold water.

He’d been dreaming of Nam again. Often, the dreams were recurring, and many times they were recollections of actual events. Sometimes, though, they contained elements that were out of place, or impossible. Like the one he’d just had. He was in the “weeds,” alone, his men dead and left behind. He’d been tramping for hours through thick vegetation and sharp Elephant Grass, and his legs were like spent rubber bands. He fell to the ground, exhausted, and cupped his body around Janis who was suddenly there with him in the jungle. All at once, a VC insurgent was on top of them, trying to wrestle Janis from Jackson’s arms. Tripp was there, watching. Jackson looked up at him, a tearful rage twisting his features, and then he wrapped his large, meaty fingers around the scrawny neck of their attacker and squeezed. And squeezed. And squeezed.

The dream was almost entirely fictitious, except for the part where he’d engaged the VC. It had been one of the harder kills, as the guy couldn’t have been much more than fourteen—his face as smooth as a baby’s, and his eyes wide and bulging while Jackson choked the life from him.

Jackson shivered, trying to dispel the memory, and toweled his cold, dripping head with vigorous strokes. Hot tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes when he thought about how close he’d come to killing his own daughter. It wasn’t the first time it had happened, and probably wouldn’t be the last. And it scared the hell out of him every time—fearing that one day he wouldn’t wake in time, or Lori wouldn’t be there to stop him, or—.
Jackson crutched out of the kitchen and back down the hallway toward his bedroom. He stopped just outside the door and listened to his wife’s soothing words to Janis.

"It’s not you, sugar. Daddy has really bad dreams, sometimes, remember? And he doesn’t know that he’s awake and safe at home. You have to remember, sweetheart, that you must never try to wake Daddy up. Not ever, okay?"

Janis mumbled something in response that Jackson couldn’t make out. He rubbed his eyes and moved through the doorway. Janis looked up at him from her mother’s lap, fat teardrops perched on her long, blonde lashes, and her lips turned down and trembling. Jackson knelt at the opposite side of the bed, his elbows sinking into the mattress when he leaned forward and clasped his fingers together.

"I’m so sorry, baby. It was the dream, again."

The apologies. The explanations. Insufficient words that hung in the air between them, useless, and empty of any power to dispel his daughter’s terror. But, afraid as she was, Janis was strong. Even in her fear, she was stronger than he deserved. And she forgave him every time.

"I know, Daddy. Mama told me. I just get s-scared."

When a man’s daughter was frightened, he wanted to protect her from whatever it was that had frightened her. He wanted to destroy the bad guy, or soothe her when she had nightmares. But how does a father protect his daughter from himself? What does a man say to his family after he’s tried to kill them in the middle of the night for the nth time?

Janis scrambled across the bed and into his arms, her tears scalding his shoulder, and his dampened her fine, flaxen hair. He looked up and caught the eyes of his wife over Janis’s head.

"I’m sorry, Lo."

Lori frowned and shrugged her shoulders. That night was only one in a long string of
crazy episodes punctuating their lives, and Jackson could feel her pulling further away from him, day by day.

Jackson blinked rapidly and shook his head. He sighed and crawled to a linen closet a few feet from his daughter’s old room, pulled out a candle and its plastic holder from a shelf inside, and crawled back to his place opposite the Petersons. He set the candle on the floor and lit the wick.

Jackson used to think that maybe he should tell Janis about it. About Vietnam. And there had been many times he’d been close to doing so. He’d wanted her to know so she could understand why he had the nightmares, and why he had trouble keeping a job, and why he was so emotionally distant. He thought that if just for a moment she could see through his eyes the things he’d seen, maybe she could put all of the craziness into perspective.

Jackson closed his eyes. He’d never had the nerve to tell her. He’d chickened out every time. Even now, he was afraid to see the rejection in her eyes. The disgust. The hate. He couldn’t bear his daughter thinking worse of him than she already did. And he couldn’t risk losing her. Hers was all the love he had left in the world.

In the glow of the flickering candle, Mrs. Peterson removed a silk, paisley scarf from around her throat, revealing two flaccid rows of flesh that shimmied against each other beneath her chin. She dabbed at several clustered beads of sweat on her husband’s forehead, but the material would not absorb the moisture and only succeeded in dispersing it from one side to the other. Peterson thanked her and leaned forward on the bed, fingering the dried blood caking the crumpled towel on his lap before lifting it to his face to finish the job his wife had started.

“I don’t mean to sound like I don’t sympathize with my brother,” he said. “I can’t
imagine it’s all that easy to live with what he did over there, what went on—”

“Just stop right there, Peterson,” Jackson warned. “You don’t know what went on over there. No one does. Even the guys who were there don’t fully comprehend what went on. And no one wants to.”

Mrs. Peterson glared at him.

“Then how do I deal with him?” Peterson said. “How do I talk to my brother? How do I get him to be a part of the world, again?”

“Well, that is the question, isn’t it?” Jackson said, his brow arching. “It’s a question that plagues the guys who fought, the families they came home to, and even the psychiatrists who try to untangle all the knots. Shit. We can’t talk about it, because that somehow makes it alive and point blank in front of us, right? But then, when we don’t talk about it, it festers and digs at our insides like a rabid tape worm, growing into a monster that we can’t beat down.”

Peterson looked up at him with a tormented expression.

“What,” Jackson said. “You thought I’d have some brilliant insight into how your brother should cope with Nam?”

Peterson looked away.

Jackson set the Glock on his lap and pulled at a hangnail on his thumb. “It wasn’t just the battle in Vietnam that fucked guys up, Peterson,” he said. “There were other dynamics—other things that pushed them over the edge.”

It was true. They’d had relationships over there. They had cultivated friendships with the other G.I.s, and with the villagers, and some of them, like Jackson, had wives and children.

Jackson gave up on the hangnail and rubbed at a smudge on the Glock’s barrel. “We lost a lot of friends over there,” was all he said. “A lot of good men.”
And some of us lost those wives and children, he thought. And in the midst of all that, they’d had to be wary of the locals—even the villagers that they knew—because they could never really tell what side those people were on. A G.I. would be standing there, having his usual conversation with some mama-san he’d talked to a hundred times before, and suddenly he’s dead on the ground, because sometimes women carried ordnance for the VC, or the North Vietnamese Army, and—well—a G.I. just never knew who he could trust. Even the kids. They’d shoot a soldier dead, or they’d try to blow his leg off while they handed him a carton of cigarettes.

Jackson tapped his prosthetic with the Glock. “Some of us were lucky. Most weren’t.”

Peterson winced, but then he shrugged as if to say, “so what now?”

But Jackson wasn’t finished.

“And then we came home,” he said. “And the mother-fuckers here wouldn’t give you the time of day. They would ignore you, or call you ‘baby-killer,’ and protest you right to your face. They acted like we started the war. That it was our politics that kept it going. Our decisions, and our control. They were against the war, sure. But, those protestors were against us, too—the soldiers who fought and bled and died in the name of the country that those citizens sat back and enjoyed every day. You’ve heard it all before, but you tell me what you think of that. Is that right? Is that what they did to those guys coming home from World War Two?”

Jackson’s fist slammed into the wall next to the hall window, rattling the panes, and Peterson’s eyes grew round and fearful.

Mrs. Peterson jumped, and leaned into her husband. “Oh, Lord,” she prayed, squeezing her eyes shut.

“I didn’t mean—” Peterson said, putting his hands up.

Jackson exhaled, and looked at him. And then he looked at Mrs. Peterson, whose eyes
were open again and moving rapidly between Jackson and Mr. Peterson.

“Well, that kind of thing died off over the years,” Jackson continued, unfazed. “People moved on to complain about other things, and left us to sort out the shit. But the stuff they said, it kind of sticks with you, you know?”

And what they said made him rehash, over and over again, his actions in country. He already remembered every kill, every face, every mortar round. But their words made him question what he’d done, and that made him wish he could have done it differently. And then he would get mad, because he knew he didn’t need to defend what he’d had to do to survive in Nam.

“What they don’t understand is that it was all about survival,” Jackson said.

Mrs. Peterson frowned and stared at Jackson and then jabbed Mr. Peterson’s ample girth with her elbow, nodding. “Jerry says that, too,” she said. “Doesn’t he, Bob? And Troy. Troy said that a lot, too.”

Peterson nodded. “And Jerry’s usually drunk, and talking to the air, when he does.”

Jackson smirked and tapped his temple with the Glock’s barrel. “That’s how we think. Even now. Everything is about survival. You’d think it would be easier, now that we’re home. But, sometimes survival stateside is harder than ducking mortars and dodging Chi Com grenades in country. There, for the most part, you knew where you stood. Here, everyone talks at you—as if you’re stupid, or twisted, and they make a face when you try to talk back, like you just sucked the liver out of a live goat.”

A scowl pulled Mr. Peterson’s features downward, and he poked his thumb toward Mrs. Peterson. “But what do we do with that kind of information?” he said. “We can’t change it. We can’t make it disappear. We can’t do anything about it, except sympathize. And what does that
do for you? How does that help you get past it so you can move forward and live your life? And you’ve got us here, now. You’ve got our attention and we’re hearing what you say, but how can anything we say or do change anything you’ve been through, or how you feel about it?”

“It can’t,” Jackson admitted.

The problem was that there were a whole bunch of people running all around America, stuffing ideas and causes down everybody’s throat at the same time they thumb their noses at the people who got them there, and at the people who made it possible for them to do it freely. People who raised them, people who educated them, people who befriended them, and people who died for them. It didn’t matter whether or not Jackson agreed with their campaign, or whether or not they agreed with his. What mattered was the lack of gratitude—the thankfulness for being alive. For being fucking free.

“You haven’t really answered my question,” Peterson said. “We’re sorry for the way people treated you when you came home from Vietnam. And we’re sorry for the way people act now, too. But I don’t know what you expect us to do.”

“You’re missing the point, Peterson. I’m not looking for sympathy. When I came back stateside, I didn’t expect complete strangers to welcome me home like I was some long, lost son. It’s more of a general attitude of thankfulness that I’m talking about. Take your son, for example. I don’t mean when he was growing up. I mean now. You give him a good childhood and you’re prepared to send him to the best schools, but he throws it back in your face by getting expelled and using you to support him. He’s not a child anymore, but he’s acting like one. Kids like him think they’re entitled to everything the world has to offer. And they think it should just be given to them and that they shouldn’t have to work for it.”

Mr. Peterson nodded, but Mrs. Peterson fumed. “It’s not like that with Alex,” she said.
“He’s just trying to find his place in the world. He’s a sweet boy who doesn’t know what he wants, yet.” The pitch in her voice rose. “How dare you attack him when you don’t even know him?”

Jackson opened his mouth, but Peterson waved it off. “No, he’s right, Sheila,” Peterson said. “Kristen is the one looking for her place in the world. Alex is only looking for an easy fix, or a free ride. You know that as well as I do. We’ve been fighting with him since he was five years old. He takes the easiest way out he can find. And when it doesn’t pan out, he blames us.”

“That is not true! Why, just two days ago he said he would try school again. He said he wanted to work harder and do better. And he said he missed us and he wants to move back home.”

Peterson made a face. “Of course he did. He’s realized how hard it is to live on his own, and how expensive it is, too. He wants to quit his job, and he knows I won’t let him stay with us unless he’s going to school and doing well there. He’s a mooch, Sheila.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Mrs. Peterson said. Her chins wrestled against her neck with each violent shake of her head. “How can you talk about your own son like that?”

“Because it’s true. And I’m tired of pretending it’s not.”

“Well, this is not the time to have this conversation, Bob.”

“This is exactly the time to have this conversation,” Jackson said. “It’s why you’re here.”

Chapter 4

The Petersons were asleep. Jackson had blown the candle out a half hour ago and the trailer was dark. His stomach growled nearly as loud as the Petersons’ resonating snores, but the idea of going back through the living room—past Talbot’s dead cop—to the kitchen, was an
unappetizing option and an effort that required more energy than he cared to expend, at the moment. He was enjoying the brief respite since the Petersons had drifted off, and savoring the absence of Talbot’s wheedling voice at the other end of the ringing phone. He was acutely aware that he had only a few scant hours before Talbot and SWAT started ramping things up. It had been a long evening and his energy was flagging. The Petersons had been there since two o’clock the previous afternoon, the police since three, and SWAT since six, and according to the red digital readout on his daughter’s clock radio, it was now a little after one in the morning. Adrenaline had kept Jackson awake and alert throughout yesterday’s activities, but that helpful secretion had dissipated some time ago. Food, then, was secondary to rest. Especially in light of what was coming. Today was going to be ugly. But today everything would be over.

He rubbed the scar on the top of his head, tracing his fingers back and forth along the raised ridges of its elongated pucker. Lo had lovingly referred to it as his “leprous badge of honor.” Jackson ground his teeth at the irony of this statement, since he’d never quite been able to discern what she’d actually meant by that term. Had it really been said lovingly? Could you say “lovingly” in the same sentence as “leprous?” She would deliver the phrase in a sweet, affected tone, as if in praise of his accomplishments as a soldier, but that word, “leprous,” made him question his mild perception of her real objective—as he’d questioned everything about Lori. It had taken him a long time to decipher that woman, to unravel the double-talk and decode the sugared language; ten long years of trying to interpret not only his wife’s temperamental moods and idiosyncratic speech patterns, but also her motives and intentions. And he wasn’t entirely certain that he’d ever succeeded. Lori was an enigma, wrapped up in a hundred and ten pounds of C-4.

He closed his eyes against the gleam of the clock’s numbers and drifted into a watchful
“pre-sleep” mode, where he remained half-awake: his breathing slow and even, and his muscles relaxed while maintaining a half-conscious readiness for immediate action if anything changed—a trick he’d learned early in Vietnam.

Lo had hated that trick, even in the beginning.

They’d been married for only two years, at the time, and their relationship was already beginning its death throes. He remembered the front door slamming in his face and the sound of the rapid tap of Lori’s heels on the front walk, followed by the bang of a car door. The roar of her ’68 Camaro had thundered from the curb, rattling the window panes, and Jackson had squeezed his eyes shut, tapping his forehead with his fist at the sound of screeching tires when Lori gunned the motor and sped away. He remembered the resigned sigh, the shake of his head, and the feeling of defeat when he’d gone to his study to wait for her return. The study was the only room in the house that had felt like his own and he’d found himself there more often than he should have—hiding from Lori, hiding from life.

Lo had been mad at him again. She was right, of course, but he hadn’t like the way she’d made her point. She had an evil way of sneaking into a heavy conversation, making him think he really mattered to her, and then she would tear him into tiny morsels and gobble him up, piece by piece. The actual issue would become secondary—lost in the shuffle of heated words and pointed jabs at his manhood. Inevitably, she would wind up cursing at him and stomping out of the house in a rage, leaving him alone with one-year-old Janis, and the annoyance of wondering when she’d be back.

The issue, that time, had been an old, worn-out subject. She was exhausted, she’d said, working fifty hours a week for her father and carrying the financial load while Jackson sat there jobless, and feeling sorry for himself and keeping her awake at night with his “stupid twitching
and his constant jumping out of the bed.” He’d apologized, as always. He had felt badly about it, after all. Still did. But, what was he supposed to have done about it? What could he do about it, even now? He had no control over the dreams, or his reflex-responses to those dreams. She’d insisted that he needed to get help. Maybe then they could both sleep in peace. He’d brushed the suggestion off, lumping it into the ever-growing pile of those things that were “inevitable,” or “a lost cause,” or “an untouchable subject.” Lo had hated that pile, and its contents drove her out the door that day, and, eventually, out the door for good.

Dozens more of those scenes arose, unbidden, into Jackson’s mind while he hovered just above consciousness. Finally exhaustion won over, pulling him into a light and fitful sleep.

The sun crept across the morning sky, compounding the elevated humidity of South Vietnam, and Jackson mopped a stream of stinging sweat from his eyes. He walked the main, dirt road leading toward Pei Ky, a small village north of Chu Lai. Tripp and Jaguar marched on either side of him, rubbing sweat from their own faces and scouring the surrounding fields for survivors. The fireteam was a man short. Jackson, Mike Tripp, and Jim Pring (aka: Jaguar) had returned for Bobcat, their grenadier. He was last seen in yesterday’s skirmish with the VC, whom they had engaged in the tree line, one click south of the village perimeter. U.S. troops had pushed Charlie eastward where the bastards fell like flies when Navy Phantom jets bombarded them with 500-pound MK-82s. The fight had ended shortly after dusk.

Jackson and the others had come back for KIAs they had missed the night before, searching since daybreak and working their way northward from yesterday’s battlefield. They hoped Bobcat was still alive, but feared the worst as the morning wore on and they found no sign of him. Tripp had a nose like a bloodhound, though. If Bobcat were still breathing, Tripp would
be the one most likely to ferret him out. Jaguar, on the other hand, was a terrible tracker, but he was lightning-quick with his ’sixteen, and although the wire frames perched on his nose housed heavily-corrective lenses, he could pick off Charlie before anyone else knew they were there.

Jackson frowned and squinted against the sun’s glare.

They were drawing closer to the village, and signs of VC were evident everywhere in the crimsoned tatters of lifeless bodies strewn about, and in those half-submerged in flooded rice paddies, nearby. No one seemed to have escaped the killing field. Men, women, and even children and swaddled infants bore the familiar punctures of guerilla AK-47s in their skulls, their throats, faces, necks, chests. Jackson’s stomach churned at the carnage. It was a sight he would never get used to. He tried not to look at their faces, but they were everywhere. Bloodied farmers, wives, and children lay sprawled like broken dolls, their limbs protruding at impossible angles from ravaged torsos, and their mouths agape in silent screams. Some of the women looked to have been killed kneeling at the side of a slain husband, while others were shot in the back, running from their attackers. Some of the villagers were gunned down where they worked. In gardens and rice paddies they had fallen, with tools and collecting baskets still clutched in their hands. One woman lay slumped over the handles of a harrow, her team of water buffalo driven to their knees by a fusillade of yawing M67s. Jackson recognized the holes in their hide, and shook his head. He knew the poor beasts hadn’t died of the bullet wounds—the creatures were too big to be affected much by AK-47 rounds. It was more likely that they’d died of suffocation in the mud, the weight of the yoke—still lashed to their necks and too heavy to bear at that angle for so long—pushing their noses into the muck.

*Someone here must have been caught talking to ARVN. Or us.*

Jaguar nodded, back-pedaling toward the center of the village with his M-16 poised
outward and swaying back and forth like a drunken compass pointer while he scanned the three-sixty. He almost tripped over the shredded remnants of a large sow, side-stepping the carcass as if it were a live grenade, and nearly lost his balance.

Tripp snorted.

Careful there, graceful, You’ll end up blowing your own head off.

He winked at Jackson, nervously, but Jackson hardly noticed. All of the livestock had been slaughtered. They had reached the center of the village and all around them were riddled chickens, ducks, and bloated cows in as many horrific poses of death as the people they’d labored under. The overkill was obviously meant to be an example to other peasants who might be helping the South Vietnamese Army, or those who might be unwilling to aid the VC. The inhabitants of Pei Ky were a simple people living in a small farming community situated between Chu Lai and Da Nang. Like most small villages in Vietnam, they were probably unarmed while they went about their daily labors, and they were merely struggling just to survive, poor as they were, and trying to stay away from the fight. Yet someone in the village had obviously been watched. Maybe they had given food or supplies to ARVN at one time, or maybe they had refused to shelter a VC insurgent. Any number of factors could have contributed to the massacre. All irrelevant, now, to the innocents of Pei Ky, who lay wasted and rotting in this unburied cemetery.

Jackson knelt before a wrinkled figure in a shallow irrigation ditch beside the road. Even in death, the old man’s face remained wide-eyed, and twisted into a frozen expression, at once surprised and agonized. Someone had used the narrow chin strap, connected to his conical hat, as a garrote. The material was embedded deep into the folds of his neck, where long, red scratches revealed where he’d tried to claw the cord away.
Jackson sighed and folded the elder’s arms onto his chest. He spoke, aloud, his voice just above a whisper.

_Ong hãy an nghỉ trong hòa bình. Rest in peace, venerable father._

A muted shout came from Jackson’s right and he scrambled to his feet, aiming his rifle toward a small hut situated to the east of the road. Jaguar and Tripp had also turned toward the sound, and held position in a guarded stance—their weapons trained on the hut’s entrance. They looked back at Jackson and he motioned for each of them to circle closer, opposite one another, and away from the hut’s line of sight. Jackson moved toward the north of the structure, flanking Tripp, peering into the darkness beyond the entrance, but he saw nothing. The bright sun had rendered the interior black as night.

They waited.

A voice croaked from inside, cracking in an adolescent pitch.

_In the name of Ho Chi Minh, I give my life. I die in honor. I die for Vietnam._

Jackson understood most of the words, and his face twisted into a deep scowl.

 Fucking Charlie!

All at once, he and his comrades jerked their rifles higher, gripping the barrels tighter and readying their trigger-fingers, when a dark head and narrow shoulders emerged from out of the black interior at the base of the entrance. The VC soldier crawled forward on his stomach, grunting while he dragged himself through the damp earth and out into the light. Jackson couldn’t be sure if he was surrendering, or if he was just crazy, but the man was unarmed and most likely alone, since the VC typically bugged out right after a fight. Their MO was to sneak in, attack, and sneak back out again, like ghosts. Odd that this one had been left behind, though. And he’d been badly beaten, by the look of it. Maybe a brave villager had grappled with him in
the limited space of the hut, gaining the upper hand for a moment, since it appeared by the drag of his lifeless legs that his back was broken.

Grimacing, the soldier shifted onto an elbow and looked up at Tripp. Jackson’s breath hitched inside his chest. The boy couldn’t have been more than fourteen.

And then the kid looked at Jackson and spit into the dirt.

*I spit on you, American soldiers! I die for The People.*

The youth cried out when Jaguar growled and yanked him upward by the collar and flipped him over. Infuriated, he jabbed the tip of his rifle against the boy’s skull, a muddy jungle boot wedged beneath the kid’s chin, and spat in his face.

*You’re going to spit on me? I’m spitting on you, you sick little bastard.*

Jackson held up his hand.

*Hold up, Jag. He might have intel. Tripp, check his clothes.*

Tripp rifled through the pockets of the black trousers and shirt, pulling them inside out, but there was nothing but a packet of hand-rolled smokes and a few wooden matches. The boy wore a thick, wide belt around his waist with a long leather pouch mounted over the hip. Tripp smiled and removed both amid cries and struggles from their captive. He tossed the bag to Jackson, who opened the buckled flap and pulled out a small bundle of papers.

*Here we go. Got some secrets in here, little man?*

Jackson shook the papers in the boy’s face.

*We’ll bring these back to camp, see if someone can make anything of them.*

He tucked the bundle back into the pouch and stowed it in Tripp’s ruck.

*Alright, then. Jag, you stay out here and watch the kid. Tripp and I will see what else is in this hut.*
Although he was sure the kid was alone, Jackson raised the tip of his ’sixteen and entered the structure in a half crouch, Tripp close on his heels. Everything looked green, for a moment, while their eyes adjusted, and Tripp switched on a flashlight to compensate. Pieces of broken cups and plates were scattered about the packed, earth floor, along with torn bed mats and sundry personal items strewn from wall to wall. There had been a mighty scuffle in here, alright. Tripp shined the light to their right, illuminating a young woman slumped against the wall and sitting in a pool of blood, evidently from a bullet to the head. A heavy shovel rested in her lap, testifying to the source of the boy’s current condition.

Tripp’s lips turned up into a sad smile.

*Good for you, tee-tee. Went down fighting.*

And then Jackson groaned.

*Oh, man. Ah, shit!*

Tripp spun, swinging the light to the opposite side of the hut. Jackson dropped to his knees beside the long, lifeless legs of an American soldier spread-eagled on the floor. His helmeted head was propped up against the wall and his eyes were half-lidded and inert. Tripp moved closer to provide better light and Jackson closed his eyes and sat back. He buried his face in his hands and shook his head, uttering muffled curses from behind trembling fingers.

*Damn, damn, damn.*

They’d found Bobcat.

*Shit!*

Jackson roared, pushing himself to his feet. He moved to the entrance, blocking the harsh glow of sunlight there, and turned back toward Bobcat—hands on his hips and his head still negating what his eyes had told him was true.
It was Tripp’s turn to kneel at his comrade’s side. He pulled the dog tags from behind Bobcat’s olive-drab shirt and held them in his palm. He rubbed the stamped surface with his thumb, tears spilling from his eyes, and his head hanging in momentary defeat.

Bobcat was special. There wasn’t a grunt in the entire company who didn’t like the soft-spoken kid from Houston. He was tall and skinny, biceps maybe the size of Jackson’s wrists and maybe a hundred and thirty pounds, all told, but he didn’t let his lack of bulk keep him from shouldering more than his fair share of any load. He’d carry out his own work without complaint, and even take on another G.I.’s camp duties for a light trade: maybe a pack of smokes or a couple of joints. And his positive attitude was unshakable. The platoon teased him often, since he was not only skinny but ugly as sin, sporting a shock of bright red hair and teeth so bucked they called him Eeyore for a time. But he took everything in stride, laughing at the incessant ribbing and childish pranks with the same gusto in which they were delivered. The teasing went on, unabated, until one day Bobcat’s quick-thinking and cat-like reflexes saved Jackson’s life.

It was on patrol, less than a month ago. There were only six of them that day. Rodriguez (otherwise known as Thumper, because he could duck out of sight faster than a rabbit into its hole) walked the point, the rest of them stringing out behind him at intervals of six yards between each man. Following Thumper, trudged PFC Dillinger—so called because, like Jaguar, he was exceptionally accurate with his ’sixteen. Behind him were Tripp, Jaguar, Bobcat, and then Jackson, bringing up the rear.

It was pouring when they left camp, the rain bouncing off their helmets and shoulders in hard, stinging splashes, but they managed to locate a small VC patrol within only ten minutes of entering the tree line. Thumper, true to his name, hit the deck so fast that Dillinger was almost
on top of him before he heard the enemy rustling in the jungle ahead and dove to the ground, himself. He picked off two Charlie in the trees, with deadly aim, before his knees even hit the ground.

Through the din of the driving rain, the rest of them saw flashes around the muzzle of Dillinger’s rifle, and heard the muted pop of the detonated rounds a few seconds later, when he dove for cover. Tripp and Jaguar rolled forward, and out of sight. Bobcat and Jackson dropped to the ground, where they huddled on their stomachs in the grass and mud, their arms forming a tripod for their rifles while they waited for movement in the trees to give them a better idea of how many Charlie they were facing.

All at once, a Chi Com grenade landed between Bobcat and Jackson, bouncing off Bobcat’s back before rolling next to Jackson’s right leg in a shallow puddle of water.

Bobcat whispered, “Shit!”

Before Jackson took his next breath, Bobcat had thrown his helmet over the VC’s homemade grenade and grabbed Jackson’s sleeve, pulling him to his feet, and they lunged behind a nearby Banyan. The muted detonation of the grenade sent the helmet flying, and dozens of little round pellets peppered the backs of their legs. But, Bobcat’s quick thinking had slowed their lethal velocity and saved them both from losing a limb—or worse, their lives.

Jackson watched Tripp stuff Bobcat’s dog tags back behind his shirt, and his shoulders sagged in a resigned sigh. He backed out of the doorway and Tripp reached for Bobcat’s helmet and pulled it off.

Jackson suddenly found himself prostrate in the mud, his helmet gone and blood gushing from the top of his head and running down his forehead in torrents. From the ground, he shouted
Tripp’s name, trying to rub the blood from his eyes, but only succeeding in smearing the stuff
deep. Finally, he was able to make out Jaguar’s horrified face floating in a crimson fog in front
of his own.

*Oh my God! Jackson! You alright, man?*

Jackson nodded, not sure if it was the truth. Jaguar grabbed his arm and pulled him to his
feet.

Jackson looked at him in a daze.

*What happened, Jag? Where’s Tripp?*

*He’s Kool-aid, man! Shit. There’s fucking brains everywhere! What the hell happened in
there, Jax?*

Jackson’s stomach lurched. He pushed Jaguar aside, violent spasms wrenching his frame
until he vomited into the dirt. After a moment he straightened, dragging the back of his hand
across his lips, and looked at the wreckage where the hut now lay in a heap of splintered
fragments.

Jaguar repeated his question.

*What happened?*

Coming back to his senses, Jackson shrugged, and he gazed at the rubble where just
moments before Tripp had been alive and mourning their dead comrade.

*We found Bobcat. He’s dead. Tripp was taking off his helmet. I think Bobcat’s head
exploded, man!*

He had heard of this kind of thing, but he’d dismissed it as sensationalist bullshit used to
scare FNGs at the beginning of their tour. He’d overheard Thumper detailing the tactic to a kid
fresh from New York City, one day. It had sounded at least partly plausible since the VC were
slippery bastards, always devising new ways to set booby traps for American soldiers, but he hadn’t really believed the story. Thumper had said that the VC would remove the top of a dead soldier’s skull, pull the pin on a grenade, and pack the device into the soft tissue of the brain—just enough to keep the spoon depressed against the body of the grenade. They would replace the skull cap, reposition the helmet on the poor bastard’s head, and leave him there until some unwitting G.I. came along to retrieve the body, dislodging the little hidden bomb and blowing them all to hell.

He hadn’t given the story a second thought. Until now.

Concern in Jaguar’s voice shook Jackson out of his momentary reverie.

_We need to do something about your head. You’re really bleeding a lot._

He went to his ruck where he’d left it on the ground, a few feet from their young prisoner—now quietly observing their movements—and pulled out an M3 First Aid bag. He unzipped it, motioning for Jackson to join him, and pulled out two clear, square packages. Jackson sat down next to him and Jaguar tore one of them open and removed a Merthiolate swab.

He pulled Jackson’s head forward and dabbed at the wound.

Jackson murmured his thanks, too distraught to notice the sting of the antiseptic.

_You’ve got a pretty good gash, here, Jax. You hit anywhere else?_ I don’t think so. Just minor scratches, here and there.

After disinfecting the wound, Jaguar packed it with petroleum-impregnated gauze and wrapped Jackson’s head with a remnant of camouflaged bandage. Jackson thanked him again and looked at the VC kid, stretched out in the mud.

The boy looked up at him and smiled. And then he laughed, braying and snorting as if he’d never seen anything so funny.
Jackson flew at the boy in a flurry of rage, tears pouring down his cheeks while he pummeled and spat in the hapless youth’s face. Cursing him, and the war, and himself, Jackson’s flying fists ceased their assault and he wrapped his fingers around the boy’s scrawny neck. The kid’s eyes widened and bulged before he finally went limp. Jackson released his hold, the back of his fingers brushing the boy’s jaw when he withdrew his hands. It was soft, like a child’s—the kid hadn’t even started shaving yet.

_Lord, Jesus!_

Jackson wept and Jaguar looked away. It was all he could do—all anyone could do—as there was very little dignity in Nam.

Chapter 5

Jackson awoke with a start—his head wet with sweat—and he sat up, his brows furrowed and his body alert to the muted sound of an approaching helicopter. He peered into Janis’s old room. Peterson was halfway out of the bed, one foot on the floor, watching him. Their eyes met by the light of the clock, the red glow rendering Peterson’s black and unreadable.

“I need to pee,” he whispered.

Jackson held up a hand, shaking his head, and looked toward the ceiling. The chopper was now directly overhead and the echo of its pulsing blades made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. The pilot strafed a blinding spotlight over the roof, triggering frenetic shadows and light flashes inside the trailer. Flickering off window panes and the irregular facets of broken skylight pieces on the floor, the spotlight produced a strobe effect that rendered the trailer like an old-time theater running a black and white movie reel. Trembling, Jackson struggled to his feet, the Glock pointed at the ceiling, and he peered out the window.
Goddamn! A TV chopper.

He looked for Talbot and spied him trying to wave the helicopter away, flinging his arms about as if warding off a swarm of bees. Jackson replaced the curtain and resumed his place on the floor, cursing under his breath.

“Down the hall to your right,” he said, finally, and wiped his face. “Don’t try anything heroic, Peterson. Your wife’s life is on the line.” He tapped the Glock’s barrel on his palm loud enough for Peterson to hear, but, truthfully, the performance was more of a mechanism to calm himself down.

Peterson nodded and stood, groaning with the effort of hefting his extraordinary weight onto his wounded leg.

“There’s a set of crutches in the closet, there, by the bed,” Jackson offered.

Peterson retrieved them and limped to the bathroom.

Finally, the hovering chopper moved off, but not completely. Jackson could still hear the whir of the blades in the distance—the pilot and camera crew probably waiting for a mind-blowing scoop, just in case the madman inside the trailer decided to made a break for it, or for something else equally captivating for their bored, bloodthirsty audience.

“Leave the light off and the door open,” Jackson warned. And then he added, “There’s a nightlight.”

He heard the hollow splash of Peterson’s stream and he sat back with a heavy sigh.

When he finished, Peterson crutched back to the bedroom and sat on the end of the bed.

“How long do you plan on keeping us here?” he said to Jackson, his tone low and even, so as not to get his wife excited.

“I don’t know. How long you going to put up with your son leeching off of you?”
Peterson shrugged.

Mrs. Peterson shot her husband a warning look.

“What am I supposed to do with him?” he said, and shrugged resignedly at his wife.

“Watch him starve out in the big bad world?”

“You have to do something,” Jackson said, “or else he’ll keep using you until you’re all dried up. And he’s not going to learn a thing by you bailing him out. You and I both know that.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“You ever thought of sending him to live with your brother?”

“With Jerry? What good would that do? You think I want my son around that unstable bastard?” He waved his hand. “Besides, Alex hardly knows Jerry. It’s not like there’s been a lot of uncle-nephew time between the two of them. I can’t trust him. He’s too volatile.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe that’s what the kid needs. Someone like your brother could really put his life into perspective.”

“How can putting Alex through what I went through with Jerry be in any way helpful?”

“Well, let’s look at that for a moment. You say that your brother never told you anything about Nam. I’ll bet he told you a lot more than you know—you just didn’t hear it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Jackson paused. “Let me ask you this. When you and your brother used to go fishing at Lake Pleasant, what was he like? I mean, did he get angry easily? Was he hard to talk to?”

“No.” Peterson shook his head. “I told you—I liked him back then. He was mellow. Yeah, he razzed me a lot, but all big brothers do that. And he had the greatest smile. I know that sounds sappy, but he did. I could be having the worst day, and all Jerry would have to do is put
on that goofy grin and all was right with the world, you know?”

“Okay. So when he came home from Nam, what was the first thing he said, that first time you saw him?”

Peterson’s brows furrowed and his head dipped in concentration.

“Hum. I’m not sure,” he said. “We hadn’t known he was coming home. He never wrote to tell us. He just showed up one day. It was weird. And he rang the doorbell. Which was also weird, because technically he still lived there.”

“Who answered the door?”

“Mom did.” Peterson squinted as if he were trying to remember the details. “It was a Saturday, just after noon. Yeah. We were all in the living room watching the news on TV, like we always did after lunch on the weekend. I remember ’cause it was a black and white set.”

Peterson snickered. “Even though color TVs had been around for a few years, Dad still refused to replace our set with a color model. He said our TV was ‘perfectly fine,’ and it ‘still worked, so why fix what ain’t broke?’ Huh,” he grinned to himself. “I can’t believe I still remember that. My grandpa and grandma were there, too—visiting from San Diego. I was arguing with Dad about the TV when the doorbell rang. Everyone was discussing the issue by that time. Mama was shouting over her shoulder, on her way to the door, while Grandma and Grandpa added their two cents worth. And then Mama opened the door and screamed, scaring the life out of everyone. She yelled, ‘Oh my Lord,’ and then there was Jerry, standing on the front stoop.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing, at first. Mama was all over him. Squealing and crying. You’d have thought he was Elvis, or something. And then Dad was shaking his hand and hugging him, and then everybody was crying and hugging and slapping his back. And Jerry still said nothing.”
“Weren’t you glad to see him?”

“Well, yeah. I was.” Peterson hesitated. “I guess. I mean, sort of. It’s hard to explain. I knew I was supposed to be glad to see him. And, I guess I told myself that I was. But I didn’t really feel glad, you know? I felt like there was something wrong with me. Something missing inside.” Peterson tapped his chest. “I saw my mom and dad and grandparents in tears, fawning over him like he was a resurrected Jesus, or something, but I couldn’t feel anything.”

Peterson shook his head, perplexed.

“He looked at me,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Over Dad’s shoulder, while he was hugging him,” Peterson said. “He looked at me. Sort of like—he was looking at his nemesis, or something. I’d been waiting to catch his eye. Waiting for him to lay that sappy grin on me, and make me feel all better. But when he finally looked at me, I—”

Peterson shook his head, and Jackson waited for him to continue.

Finally he sighed, long and deep, and said, “When he looked at me, I was terrified. It was like looking into the eyes of a ghost, and not a very friendly one. I didn’t know it then, but I think, now, that maybe it was then that I realized that my brother was dead. Not physically dead, of course. But that man standing in the doorway was no longer the happy young man I remembered. When he left, three years earlier, he hugged me—so tight. And I cried. And he laughed. And then he socked me in the arm, grinning that stupid, awesome grin. Do you know, that’s the last time I saw him smile? Ever?”

“What was the first thing he said to you?” Jackson pressed.

Peterson hesitated, rubbing his eyes with a thumb and forefinger.
“I don’t remember,” he said, finally.

“Yeah, you do,” Jackson probed.

Peterson glared at Jackson, the clock’s light highlighting the shadows of his scowl.

“I just wanted to look at his stuff,” he spat. “The stuff he brought back from Vietnam. He hadn’t said a word for two days, since he showed up at the door. I had so many questions and he wasn’t talking, so I went into his room while he was gone from the house to look at his stuff. Maybe get my own answers.”

“Go on.”

“There was this picture,” Peterson said, looking off into the distance. “It was Jerry and some Vietnamese girl. They were smiling at the camera like they hadn’t a care in the world. He was in his dress uniform, and she was in a long gown, like—like there wasn’t a war going on all around them. I don’t know why,” he said, looking back at Jackson, “but the picture made me mad. Maybe because it looked like he was away having a good time without me. Maybe it was because he’d never told us about his life in Vietnam. Or maybe I was mad because he was home when I’d really expected never to see him again. I had prepared myself for that, you know. Especially while the numbers of troops killed in action kept going up, every day, on the news.”

Peterson drew a long breath. “And then suddenly Jerry was there, pinning me to the bed with his hand around my throat, and I couldn’t breathe. When he finally let go, I sat up and cried, apologizing. Blubbering. But he didn’t care. He looked at me with that same look I saw at the door, only now there was fire there, too. He looked at the picture I’d been looking at, and then at me, again.” Peterson looked at his hands. “And then he told me, if he ever saw me in there again, he’d kill me. And then he told me to get out.”

Jackson nodded. “That right there is your brother telling you about Vietnam.”
Peterson looked up at Jackson. “I don’t understand.”

“That look in your brother’s eyes,” Jackson said. “I’ve seen it in the eyes of nearly everyone I knew that fought in Nam, including myself. Every time I looked in the mirror I saw it. Even now I still see it staring back at me: that ‘ghost’ you were talking about. I’m a stranger to my own self, sometimes. Hell, most times.”

“But what is that telling me about Vietnam?” Peterson said, frustrated. “Jerry really never said a word about it.”

“It sounds to me like your brother was scared of you,” Jackson said, and held up a hand when Peterson shook his head. “Not scared of you, physically, but scared of the life in you. Scared because he’d lost the spark he could see in your eyes. The spark that he used to have. And he was scared because he knew he would never get it back—because he felt as dead as if he lay in a flag-draped coffin, buried with the other grunts who had really died in Nam.”

Jackson rubbed at his leg—trying to ease the discomfort where it met the edge of the prosthesis—and then he looked hard at Peterson.

“What he was telling you,” he continued, “without actually saying the words, was that he didn’t want you to see that part of him. And he didn’t want to—infect you—with what was fighting inside of him. He was broken, Peterson. Literally broken.”

Peterson scratched his head, and stared at the wall, a deep frown etching his face. Even in the poor lighting, Jackson could see the myriad emotions roiling there.

Peterson wiped his hands on his knees. Without looking up, he said, “I wish he’d told me what you’re telling me. I had no idea what was going on. What he was thinking. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done to make him hate me. Because I thought he did, you know. If he’d only talked to me, maybe I could have understood, and—and helped him.”
“Maybe. But, probably not. How old were you when he came home?”

“I was thirteen, almost fourteen.”

“Yeah.” Jackson nodded. “You were probably too young to hear what he might have had to say. I mean, how do you think you would have responded if he’d told you that he’d had to—”

Jackson faltered and Peterson’s head canted to the side, an expectant frown on his brow.

Jackson took a deep breath and rubbed his jaw, never taking his eyes from Peterson’s.

“—that he’d had to kill boys close to your age because they were fighting for the VC?”

Peterson looked at Jackson. “I—I don’t know,” he admitted. After a moment he said, “But, he didn’t even give me the chance to find out. Why couldn’t he just be straight with me?”

Jackson sighed. How could he answer that for Peterson in a way he would understand? How could he explain the fear of a loved one’s look of disgust, horror, or pity after such a revelation? What would Peterson have thought of Jerry, and the rest of the soldiers, after hearing about what they’d had to do?

“He was afraid of losing you. And half of what was in his head were things that even he could hardly bear to think about. How could he tell his kid brother about that stuff when he didn’t even want to think about it, himself? What in the world could a thirteen-year-old American kid—who had never seen war, or death, or the act of killing—actually do with that kind of information?”

“But I would have understood! And, I would have supported him, somehow.”

“That’s really easy to say, now. When you’re all grown up and you’re looking back, and you’re sitting at gunpoint and someone is making you listen. If you’re honest with yourself, Peterson, you’ll see why he couldn’t tell you. He just couldn’t say the words and you just couldn’t hear them.”
“But what about later, when I grew up? Why couldn’t he tell me, then?”

“Just a variation of the same problem,” Jackson said. “Now, instead of just keeping the secrets of Nam, he’s got to keep all the garbage inside that accumulated between you since his arrival home. There’s so much in there that even I don’t know how to make you understand. And I was there, living it right alongside him.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, lost in thought. And then Peterson sat up straighter and looked pointedly at Jackson. “Maybe—” he said, his tone measured, “maybe you could tell me your story—make me see what it was like to be you, what it was like to fight in Vietnam. Maybe then I could understand Jerry better. And maybe even help him. Or, at least, it’ll give me a way to talk to him.”

Jackson’s brows dipped downward and he shook his head. The flashbacks, the nightmares. They already consumed him. He was crazy with it. Dredging it all up again—saying it out loud where it could never be taken back—would make it too palpable. Too there, all over again. It would be mental suicide. And there was no way in hell a civilian was going to understand any of that.

It was a paradox, really. People like Peterson needed to know everything, every last detail, in order to change their attitudes toward each other, and toward vets and soldiers. Yet, for that to happen, someone had to tell the hard stories. But, who wanted to volunteer for that job? What suffering soldier would want to relive all of that just so his neighbor would stop calling the police every time he raised his voice? And, what guarantee was there that even after gaining all of that new knowledge, his neighbor wouldn’t wind up hating him more than ever?

“I can’t, man. I just can’t,” Jackson said, looking at the floor.

Peterson nodded as if he’d expected as much. He looked over his shoulder at Mrs.
Peterson, who shrugged, noncommittally, and then his attention turned back to Jackson.

“Did you—did you have a lady over there? In Vietnam?”

Jackson started, blinking at Peterson, and then he winced and closed his eyes.

Chapter 6

It was exceptionally hard to talk about Hoa. Jackson had dreams and flashbacks about her quite often. Sometimes he would dream that he’d killed her. And sometimes he dreamed that he’d found her body eviscerated, their child torn from her womb. The dreams were almost always bloody and gruesome like that, and he would often wake up in the middle of one, his face wet with the tears he’d shed inside the nightmare, weeping as if the delusion had really happened. He would come back to himself, thankful that it was only a dream—always shaking, uncontrollably, and alarmed at how real it had seemed. Occasionally, his dreams of Vietnam depicted scenarios that had really happened, but mostly they were warped renditions of those events.

But the flashbacks were always real. And he couldn’t decide which was worse: fantasies of dreadful scenes in which she died over and over again, often by his own hand, or reliving the old, very real feelings of utter love, and hope, and then re-experiencing the hopelessness when they’d told him she had been killed. And beyond that, the flashbacks reminded him of the indefinable feeling of helplessness washing over him when they’d informed him that they hadn’t even a body to bring home to him. And compounding that, they hadn’t allowed him to search for Hoa, since the area was so dangerous, and because his chances of finding her were pretty much next to zero. She was just—gone.

Jackson shuddered.
“If it’s too hard to talk about—”

Jackson shook his head. “No. I guess Hoa deserves to have her story told.” His brows dipped a fraction. “She was a good woman. And, aside from her death, my memories of her are happy ones.”

Peterson waited.

Jackson drew himself up and began by telling Peterson about how he’d met his wife—the pub, her occupation, her history, even her death—leaving nothing out. And then he just talked about Hoa, the woman.

The day they were married, Hoa’s only living male relative, Chien—a second or third cousin—perched stiffly on the edge of an easy chair in Jackson’s apartment, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Using a bit of the stilted Vietnamese he’d learned, Jackson tried to make small talk in an attempt to ease the awkward silence, but Chien would only nod and stare at the door to the master bedroom, willing the women to emerge. At a loss, Jackson shrugged and popped the top off a twelve ounce bottle of Biere 33, or Ba Moui Ba, as the Vietnamese called it, and poured a glass for Chien, who brightened, considerably. It was a French, golden lager brewed in Da Nang, and a local favorite of Saigon. Chien licked his lips in anticipation while, in the interest of good manners, he waited for Jackson to pour himself a glass, watching the amber bubbles rise into a foamy head at the top. Jackson set the empty bottle onto the coffee table and held his glass up.

Vô. Cheers.

Chien nodded and drank his beer in three long gulps, holding his glass out to Jackson when he finished.
Jackson grinned.

More?

Chien nodded, and he smiled for the first time that afternoon.

Jackson tossed back his own drink and poured them both another. Chien toasted the second round, and they each swallowed it as quickly as they had the first. When Jackson poured a third draft, they both eased back into their chairs and savor the liquid, smiling and nodding in appreciation of the refreshing reprieve from the day’s nervousness and heat.

A few minutes later, Hoa’s mother, Chau, came out of the bedroom, quickly shutting the door behind her, and looked around the room. Apparently, she wasn’t seeing what she was looking for, and she turned her wrath on Chien, pelting him with a heated torrent of Vietnamese. The conversation was spoken way too fast for Jackson to follow, but he saw Chien’s face grow red the longer Chau barked at him. When she finished, she reentered the bedroom, slamming the door behind her, and Chien struck a match and started lighting the myriad candles he’d earlier placed around the room. When he finished, he switched off the lamps and resumed his seat on the easy chair.

Jackson looked at him and Chien shrugged, and then spoke in heavily accented English.

Priest late.

The priest ended up being an entire hour late, but he finally arrived with his incense and plumes, ready to start the ceremony. Chien knocked on the bedroom door, muttering something unintelligible, and the room fell silent, the three men waiting, once again, for the women to come out.

And then the door opened and Chau pushed it wide, motioning for Chien to join her at the threshold. He scurried over, and stood aside while Auntie Lan, Auntie Tien, Hoa’s sister’s, and
then her mother, bustled to various chairs set up around the living room. When they were settled, Chien moved into the bedroom, and then reemerged with Hoa on his arm.

Jackson’s breath caught in his throat.

Jackson was quiet. He would never forget seeing Hoa in her wedding dress. It was as if he’d seen her for the first time, that day. Her smile exuded a sweetness he’d never seen—then, or since—and her beauty was surpassed by none.

“I’d never seen anyone so beautiful,” Jackson breathed. “When she stepped out of that room, everything else in the world fell away. And I remember thinking what a lucky man I was to be so blessed, and so happy, in the midst of so much suffering.”

Mrs. Peterson’s lips twitched into an involuntary half-smile, and Mr. Peterson nodded at Jackson, reaching back across the bed to pat his wife’s knee.

She was stunning. An exquisite combination of a Bird of Paradise and a Lotus flower, Hoa was an amalgamation of sharp angles and crisp planes, yet soft, pliant, and delicate. He was almost afraid to touch her. The women had spent hours on her. By the time they finished, she looked like the porcelain China doll his mother used to keep on the top of an antique highboy in her bedroom.

The ends of Hoa’s hair had been cut in a blocked line, looking as if it were all one, thick piece, and it had been brushed until it hung smooth and straight—falling just above her waist. The deep blue-black of it shined like obsidian in the flicker of the lighted candles when she moved into the room.

Her dress was striking, hanging slim and elegant to her ankles. It was a traditional
Vietnamese frock: a currant-red áo dài, with black detailed embroidery throughout, complemented by a front and back panel of diaphanous, red gauze that draped to just below the knee. The deep red of the dress provided a stark contrast against the black of her hair, and Jackson’s heart fluttered. But when she looked at him and smiled, his heart stopped altogether.

Jackson’s voice croaked when he spoke.

You’re an angel.

Chien guided her forward, placing her tiny hand into Jackson’s sturdy palm. Jackson heard none of the words spoken during the ceremony. Hoa’s presence next to him, in her finery and loveliness, usurped every bit of his attention, the aroma of fresh gardenias wafting into his nostrils, and clouding his senses. When their union was finally pronounced, Jackson turned to Hoa, trembling, and kissed her.

“God, I felt like a teenager on my first date,” Jackson said. “And she was so tiny, so fragile-looking.”

He’d thought he would break her. But she wasn’t fragile. She was a tough woman, his Hoa. She’d worked hard all her life, and though he’d never asked her to, she’d worked just as hard trying to make him happy.

“I couldn’t wait for the war to be over,” Jackson continued. “I wanted to bring her home to meet my family, and make more babies, and live happily ever after. Stupid, right? Something so simple, yet, in the long run, more like a pipe dream.”

“I’m sorry you never got to realize that dream,” Peterson said.

“Yeah,” Jackson agreed. “Me too. But, I don’t know why I expected it to end differently than it did. It was war, for chrissakes. After all I’d seen and done, why should I come out
smelling like a rose over anyone else? Why should I deserve to be happy? I shouldn’t. I didn’t. It ended the way it did because it had to.”

“You make it sound like it was fated to happen. Like the war didn’t want you to be happy.”

“I know what it sounds like, when I say that. It sounds cynical, and defeatist. But I do think it was fated to end that way. That it was my fate. Some kind of Karmic justice, or something, you know?”

“If you’re right, then how does Hoa’s fate fit in? By your logic, did she deserve to pay the price of fate keeping you from being happy?”

Jackson hung his head. “No,” he admitted. “I don’t know. I just don’t know what to think about any of it, anymore. And I don’t know how to reconcile Hoa’s death in my head. I go over that day, again and again, trying to figure out what I did wrong. What I could have done to save her life. I shouldn’t have let her go to her aunt’s. I shouldn’t have let her leave the house, ever.” He looked at Peterson. “What kind of husband lets his wife get murdered like that?”

“Like you said, it was war,” Peterson replied. “And, short of locking your wife up in the house and putting her in a plastic bubble, there was nothing you could have done to stop what happened.”

“Yeah,” Jackson said. “That’s what I keep telling myself.”

Peterson changed the subject. “How did you meet Janis’s mother?”

“We met at a party on New Year’s Eve, a year after I returned stateside.” Jackson snickered. “We were both drunk as hell, that night, and she got sick all over me. Romantic start, huh?”

Peterson smirked.
“But I liked her, anyway,” Jackson continued. “She was spunky. In a weird way she sort
of reminded me of Hoa by being the opposite of her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Jackson waved his hand. “Where Hoa was tiny, dark-haired, and
quiet, Lo was tall, blonde, and outspoken. But she was strong, like Hoa. Only—well, I guess
Lori’s brand of strength was more brash and loud, while Hoa’s was stoic and brave.”

The biggest difference, however, was the way they had loved. Love with Hoa was sweet
and pure, as if nothing else existed outside themselves. Jackson recalled many nights when she
lay in his arms, his thoughts clinging to nothing except the delicate trail of her fingertips drifting
across his chest, and her warm breath whispering against his neck like a soft summer breeze.

Love with Lori, on the other hand, felt like an act of desperation. How often had they
come together in the middle of the night, grappling for each other—arms and legs clinging,
scratching—their bodies gyrating in a jagged convolution of opposing rhythms? Those were
ephemeral moments that had departed as quickly as they had approached. And they hadn’t held
each other, afterward, or whispered endearments into the other’s ear. Instead, Lori would often
cry, and Jackson, unsure of what to say or do, would wind up turning over, his back to his wife—
blinking blindly in the night until her sniffles became soft snores.

“We didn’t know where we belonged, Lori and I,” Jackson said to Peterson. “There was
always this tension between us and the world.”

In the beginning, being with Lo had kept him somewhat grounded—especially because
the memories of Vietnam were still relatively fresh. She was who he clung to, then, when the
nightmares seemed so real that he could taste the tang of napalm on his tongue, and feel the sting
of the rainy-season’s violent downpour on his skin, even when his eyes were wide open and he
was sitting up in bed, gasping for air. In those very early days, she would hold him, sometimes for hours, until he was convinced that there wasn’t an enemy soldier camped in the next room.

Jackson’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe, we were afraid that if we let go of each other, the world would stop spinning and implode,” he said, and looked at the floor. “I guess Lo was sort of a lifeline to reality, for me.”

But that part didn’t last beyond the first year with Lori. She was a fighter, in her own right. A fighter in the good sense of the word, and in the bad. Before long, instead of holding him during those episodes, she would walk out of the room with a blanket and a pillow, mumbling under her breath and shaking her head. Jackson would often find her the next morning on the living room sofa, or, after Janis was born, in the daybed next to her crib. And then the arguing started. Lo was very verbal, and very frank, hurling insults and objects with dogged frequency until, finally, she packed up her things, and Janis, and walked out the door for good.

“What happened?” Peterson said. “I mean, I assume you’re no longer together.”

Jackson shrugged. “I suppose our break up was inevitable,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I was a living nightmare for her to deal with. And she’d become pretty bitter.”

He lifted his shoulders, ruefully. Lo had become less spunky and far more spiteful, over the ensuing years. He didn’t know what demons she had come into their marriage with, but he thought she’d left with even more.

Jackson reflected a moment. “Nam’s fallout didn’t just affect the soldiers,” he continued, shaking his head. “It destroyed marriages and families and all of our relationships. There’s no one left in my family that I talk to, or who talk to me, except Janis, and I don’t have a single friend left that I started out with before the war. A lot of those guys enlisted, or were drafted, and then died in Vietnam. Or, some came home like I did: warped and useless. Of those few who
didn’t go to war, I had nothing left in common with them. It was as if we were from two separate planets.”

“What about those you met in Vietnam?” Peterson asked.

Jackson looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “I wrote to a couple of the guys—the only guys left from my squad—Dillinger and Thumper. But we only exchanged a few letters before we all got caught up trying to adjust back to civilian life,” he admitted. “I haven’t heard from either of them for more than twenty-five years, or more, I guess. They could be dead, now, for all I know.”

“What happened to the others?”

“They were all killed,” Jackson said, matter-of-factly. He closed his eyes for a moment. “All of them medevaced out in a flying hearse.”

Peterson nodded. “They were your friends?”

“Yes,” Jackson said, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

“That must have been really tough. I’m sorry.”

“It was. And they all went hard.” Jackson paused. “But, Jaguar went the hardest.”

Jackson couldn’t verbalize what happened that day, but the memory of it lingered forever in his mind, like it had happened only that morning. The too-quiet jungle, the sound of his heart pounding in his ears like he was holding his breath under water, and each soldier in his platoon gripping their rifles in terrified anticipation of the inevitable battle.

They were in the Quang Nam Province on a “search and destroy” mission. Jackson’s platoon moved through thick trees and Elephant Grass with slow deliberation, looking for NVA and VC. No one knew exactly where the enemy was, and the G.I.s’ movements and expressions
reflected an instinctive fear of this unknown. Jackson knew that fear well. And although he’d been in that position more times than he could count, he still felt the prickly bumps on the back of his neck in anticipation of an ambush. That anxiety of never feeling safe because you could die at any moment.

All at once there was gunfire everywhere. The repeating sound of AK-47s, and the platoon’s M-16s in answer to the onslaught, all popping in muted bursts amid curt shouts and men diving for cover. It seemed to come from all around them, stray rounds splintering trees and puncturing the bodies of crouched soldiers, who cried out as they were pelted with those yawning M67s. And every G.I. was shooting back at ghosts hidden somewhere in the trees. Jackson called for his platoon to fall into a defensive perimeter, but no one moved in that direction—either because they couldn’t hear him over the noise of the gunfire, or because they were too panicked to listen, intent on shooting anything and everything since they couldn’t even see where the enemy shots were coming from.

Before long, two squads, who had moved forward from Jackson’s position back with the rest of the platoon, were taking on heavy fire. Men were dropping like flies, even as they pushed the enemy northward. Jackson maneuvered forward, calling out to his men for help while he radioed to camp for helicopters to pick up the wounded. Jackson grabbed jackets and rucksacks, and pulled the injured men, one by one, back toward the tree line near the clearing’s PZ, where the choppers would pick them up. Two or three men helped him while others continued to barrage the enemy with a full-on assault. Thirteen troops had been hit, and he could see another wounded G.I. waving his hands from under a cluster of Aluminum plants. Jackson raced toward him in a crouched sprint, the bullets zinging over his head and whipping through tree fronds and branches while he dodged and weaved his way forward. Finally, he knelt at the man’s side,
wincing at the extent of the soldier’s wounds. He said he thought he’d been blown about a hundred feet from a concussive blast, and Jackson could see that he was barely hanging on.

*Jaguar!*

Jackson recognized Jaguar’s glasses before he recognized the man. The lenses were cracked and broken and somehow still hanging from one ear while Jaguar moaned, his head rolling back and forth on the ground. Blood was smeared across his contorted features from a missing ear, and from other head wounds perforating his skull, but the worst of his injuries must have been internal, as he was bleeding, profusely, out of his mouth.

Jackson spoke, again, his voice breaking.

*Jaguar?*

Jaguar’s frame shook from a violent coughing spasm that ravaged through his lungs, and then he looked up at Jackson and grinned, his mouth thick with blood.

*You make sure to look my wife up when you get back to Phoenix. Tell her I love her, and that she’s way prettier than Ann Margret.*

Jackson shook his head.

*You live all the way in Colorado, Jag. You gonna’ have to get there and tell her, yourself.*

Jaguar closed his eyes, again.

*I know. But my insides feel like jell-o, man. I don’t think I’m going to make it out of Never-Never Land, Jax.*

Jackson clasped what was left of the hair on either side of Jaguar’s head and leaned down into his face.

*Don’t leave me here alone, Jag, you son-of-a-bitch! You’re all I got left.*

*Not—true.*
A bubble of blood popped in the air with the sound of his broken voice.

*You got Dillinger and Thumper.*

Jackson shook his head, again.

*They’re not the original fireteam, man! They’re not you. You got to hang on, Jag.*

But Jaguar couldn’t hang on. He looked at Jackson one last time and grabbed the back of his neck, looking him in the eye before drawing his last breath.

*Find her and tell her, Jackson.*

And then his hand fell away.

The trauma to his internal organs, and a shrapnel puncture deep in the back of his neck, drained him of his life’s blood, drawing Jackson’s third best friend into the nebulous regions of the afterlife. Jackson fell forward onto Jag’s chest, his balled fists pounding on the stilled surface, and tears etching a fresh trail through the camouflage and grime of his own face and down onto Jaguar’s saturated t-shirt.

His voice trembled with anger.

*You son-of-a-bitch! I told you not to leave me, man. You rotten shit—leaving me here in this fucking jungle, alone. Who’s going to walk point for me, huh? Who’s going to find Charlie and kill the little gooks before they even know what’s hit ’em? Dammit, Jag!*

In the end, they got everyone else out of there, but Jackson’s platoon, alone, ended up with twenty wounded, and two dead. Handing Jaguar into the chopper that day, knowing he’d never see his face again, hurt more than anything he’d ever felt. It was the same with Tripp and Bobcat. And the only thing he had to remember any of them by was Jaguar’s broken glasses, which he’d snagged off his friend’s dead face before dragging him to the PZ. Tripp and Bobcat
were so blown up, that there wasn’t much left that he hadn’t turned over to his company commander. God, he missed those guys.

“Jaguar died in a battle in the Quang Nam Province, east of Laos.” It was all Jackson could say out loud to Peterson about how Jag died. “My commander put me in for a bronze star, for that operation,” he said, “which I did get, later, along with a letter lauding my ‘heroic bravery.’”

Jackson’s face twisted into a sneer, and he said, “There’s just something completely defeating about getting a decoration when your comrades and best friends are going home in gladbags. It’s the worst kind of irony. Almost seems like a slap in Jaguar’s face, you know? Like I was saying: ‘You died, Jag, so I could get a commendation.’ There’s just nothing laudable about surviving when your best friends are suffering and dying right in front of you. And all that bronze star does is remind me of that.”

“My brother had a cigar box full of medals like that,” Peterson said. “I have no idea what he’d done to earn them, but there sure were a lot. When he wasn’t home, I used to sneak into his room and look at them. I’d pull them out of the box and line them up on the bed, making up heroic scenarios about each and every one. It never occurred to me that they might just be reminders of moments like you just described.”

“Yeah. They’re like a—a ‘blood prize,’ or something. I’ve tried to throw mine away, time and again, but then I keep hanging on to them. When it comes right down to it, I guess throwing them away is like throwing away the sacrifice my buddies made for me to get them—sick as it sounds. It’s a twisted kind of logic, but it’s the only way I know how to honor those guys now.”

“Did you ever contact Jaguar’s wife?” Peterson said.

“Actually, I did,” Jackson nodded. “Not long after I returned stateside, I drove to
Colorado to see her. She and their kids lived near the army base at Fort Carson. Her name was Betty. Betty Rae Pring. She was a pretty little thing, too.” Jackson snickered and shook his head. “I don’t know how that blind, four-eyed little shit ever landed a girl like Betty, ’cause she was not only pretty, but refined, too. She lived in a center-hall Colonial knock-off that she invited me into like I was royalty—offering me tea and sitting me down in an old-fashioned parlor. I’d never seen anything like it. I know she didn’t build that place with the likes of Jag’s paychecks, though. I’m pretty sure her father must have financed it.”

“Sounds like an odd house for a Colorado town. And for a young couple, don’t you think?”

“It was,” Jackson agreed. “Driving through the neighborhood, hers was the only one with that design. But it sure was pretty, and perfectly landscaped and well-kept. Betty told me that she’d had it built while Jaguar was a ‘world away, in country.’ She cried when she told me this. I don’t know. The whole visit was pretty nuts.”

Betty had told Jackson that she’d been furious with Jag for enlisting, even though he probably would have been drafted, anyway. She’d said that she had the house built to remind him of the ‘war between brothers and families.’ That was how she had put it. Which was kind of crazy, because it meant that she was talking about the Civil War. But that didn’t really matter. Jag never saw it, which was why she’d been crying. She’d said she felt so petty building the damned thing after the army showed up at her door, apologizing for the death of her husband. And now she couldn’t sell it, no one would buy it, and would he like some more tea? It had been like being inside a movie. Funny, and elegant, and fucked up, all at the same time.

“What did she say when you gave her Jaguar’s message?” Peterson asked.

“Not a whole lot. I think she was still kind of numb from the news that he’d died. Even
though it was months later. I felt kind of like an intruder, you know? Giving her a personal message like that—being, essentially, a stranger, since she said she’d only heard about me in letters from Jag—and doing it in her personal home, in that pretty parlor. I don’t know. I tried to get out of there, fast, but she just kept on talking.”

The whole episode had felt awkward and surreal, and some of her subjects had emerged as completely random thoughts, zigzagging all over the place as if she were just musing aloud in the disjointed way people do when they talk to themselves. Like what she’d said about the house, and then she’d talk about the weather, and about the army telling her about her dead husband, and then about the clematis overtaking the southern face of the house. She had sounded like she was losing her mind.

“What’d you do?”

“Well, I finally got out of there. I was polite, and she didn’t catch on that I thought she was crazy. I don’t know what ever happened to her. I should have kept tabs on her, I suppose, but I never contacted her again. Military life is hard on a wife, I guess.”

Peterson made a face and looked at his wife. She looked away, biting her lip with a big sigh.

“I imagine it is. It’s kind of how I met Sheila.”

Chapter 7

Peterson stood up from the end of the bed and ambled to the side of it and sat down next to his wife. Cringing, he swung his legs up and pushed himself back into the propped pillow against the wall—the bed groaning and creaking in protest, as if it were on the verge of collapsing. He settled, finally, and slid his hand beneath Mrs. Peterson’s, locked his fingers with
hers, and heaved a deep sigh. Her lips pursed in a tortured frown, and she lay her head on the fleshy mound of her husband’s shoulder and closed her eyes, as if resigned to whatever fate would follow.

“Jerry served with a guy in Vietnam who, it turned out, had grown up in Scottsdale,” Peterson said, scratching at the beginnings of a bald spot on the top of his head. “When Troy got back to Arizona from overseas, he looked Jerry up. Troy was really the only person that Jerry would talk to—or could talk to, I guess—so we saw him at the house quite often. Mostly, they would hole up in Jerry’s room, or down in the basement, where they’d play cards, drink, and smoke until it was creeping up the stairs and into the kitchen. Mom would get furious, but she was afraid of Jerry as much as the rest of us, so when her requests for Jerry to stop were ignored, she’d just sigh and go back to her sewing, or whatever she was doing at the time.”

Jackson nodded, recognizing the familiar behavior.

“Sometimes, though,” Peterson continued, “Troy would stay for dinner, and we got to know him pretty well. Every now and then, my folks would invite his wife to join us. She was about nineteen, at the time, and I was about fourteen. I fell in love with her the moment I laid eyes on her.” He smiled. “Of course, I’m sure she thought of me as a pesky little kid, but she was an angel to me. All leggy in her mini-skirt, and the sweetest voice I’d ever heard.”

Peterson squeezed Mrs. Peterson’s hand and she looked up at him, a faint smile tweaking the corners of her mouth.

“Sheila?” Jackson said, his brow arched in amusement.

Peterson nodded, and scratched absently at a narrow runnel of dried blood still clinging to his temple. “But, of course, she was married to Troy, so there was obviously no hope for us. But, then they divorced some years later, although it wasn’t until after I’d graduated MIT and landed
a job at Lockheed Martin that I ran into her, again. She worked in human resources there, and when I went into her office to go over insurance options, there she was.” He stroked Mrs. Peterson’s head in a slow and tender motion. “My dream girl, sitting there looking as beautiful as the day I’d met her. I noticed that she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, but I asked her how Troy was, anyway. She told me they had been divorced for three years, and I wasted no time in asking her out, I can tell you.”

“And the rest, as they say, is history,” Jackson said.

“Pretty much,” Peterson agreed. “We married a year later. But during the time we dated, I learned a little bit about what it was like being the wife of a Vietnam vet. We compared experiences: hers with Troy, and mine with Jerry. Neither one of us had known what to do with the two of them, since neither of them would talk to us about anything. And then, Troy disappeared after they divorced, and even Jerry didn’t know where he’d gone.”

“What was it like for you?” Jackson said, looking at Mrs. Peterson. “Being married to Troy, I mean.”

Mrs. Peterson raised her head from her husband’s shoulder and let out a big sigh. She shrugged. “My story is a lot like yours and Lori’s, I guess,” she said. Her voice cracked a little after being silent for so long. “I wasn’t as bitter as she was, I suppose, but it was hard not to be.” She paused, and looked down at her hands, her chins quivering with the shake of her head. “He almost killed me. More times than I can count. The night he broke my arm is when I finally decided to leave. I just packed up my boy and got out of there, and—”

“Wait a minute,” Jackson interrupted, and looked at Peterson. “Alex isn’t your boy?” Peterson looked down at his hands and shook his head. “Not by blood, no.” Jackson smirked. “You didn’t tell me that, before.”
“It’s irrelevant.” Peterson shrugged. “I’ve raised him since he was a toddler, and I consider him mine, especially since he hasn’t seen his dad in all this time.”

Jackson nodded. “Does he know who his real father is?”

“He knows who his biological father is,” Peterson frowned. “I am his real father.”

Jackson waved his hand. “I know, whatever. You know what I mean. Anyway, what does he think of all of that?”

“I don’t know,” Peterson sighed. “I think he likes to use it as an excuse to fail, or to not care about something. He blames his father for his behavior.”

Mrs. Peterson shifted from Peterson’s embrace and leaned back against the wall. She was silent, but Jackson could see her bottom lip trembling.

“In what way?” he said.

“Oh, he says things like: ‘You don’t understand. If my father hadn’t dumped me, maybe I wouldn’t feel like such a piece of shit. I can’t do anything right.’ Things like that.”

“It pisses you off when he says that, huh?” Jackson said.

“Yeah, it does,” Peterson agreed. “It’s like Troy has this power to screw up my family, even in his absence. And it makes me mad at Alex, too. He acts as though he’s been an orphan all these years, like I wasn’t there all that time, raising him, feeding him, caring for him.” He swallowed. “And loving him.”

“Ungrateful bastard.”

Mrs. Peterson closed her eyes, again, a tear escaping from one of them, but she still said nothing.

Peterson looked hard at Jackson, and then his expression softened. “I guess so, yeah. Ungrateful.”
Ingratitude might be one of the worst feelings a man could feel from someone else, Jackson thought.

“It’s what I’m talking about, here,” he said.

After all, it’s not like he expected over-the-top recognition, or medals, or fame for fighting in Vietnam. Those were surface sentiments that didn’t carry very far. A lack of accolades was just not the issue. Appreciation and gratitude was.

“People just want to be acknowledged, somehow, for the huge amount of effort that they put into doing things for other people, or for the greater good,” Jackson continued. “And it doesn’t even have to be in the form of a verbal thanks. It can come in the way of positive action. Your kid getting decent grades in school, for instance. Or a job offer that doesn’t fall through when they find out you’re a Vietnam vet.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Peterson asked.

Jackson knew that the rescinded job offers weren’t the only reason he’d stayed unemployed for so long, but they had certainly compounded the problem. After awhile, he’d begun to go to interviews already irritated and resentful, blowing his chances before he even answered the first question. Before long, he’d stopped filling out applications, altogether—infuriating his wife and depressing himself even more. It was a vicious circle.

“More or less,” he answered. “But, I suppose a lot of it was my own fault. I gave up, for awhile. That is, when I felt disenfranchised, or singled out, or ignored, or devalued, I’d stop trying.”

“That’s pretty insightful stuff, recognizing that about yourself,” Peterson interposed. “If you know all that to be true, how can you keep behaving in the same way?”

Jackson had asked himself the same thing, a thousand times. He knew that he was
sabotaging his own life, ruining his chances of a good job and a happy marriage, but he couldn’t find a way to change it. Or to make himself change it in a lasting way. Or he would try, and he’d screw it up, or someone else would screw it up, landing him back in the same place he’d started.

He tried to explain it to Peterson, but it came out sounding like a cop-out.

Peterson shook his head. “From what you’ve told me about your experiences in Vietnam,” he said, “I think that maybe what you’ve been through is keeping you resentful. And, maybe that’s what makes you incapable of getting, or keeping, a job.”

“Didn’t I just say that?” Jackson scowled.

“Yes, but what I mean is,” Peterson stammered, “you know that the problem is partially misplaced resentment—I mean, I know part of your issue is the way you’ve been treated since returning from Vietnam—but you also resent that you had to kill people, and that you had to watch your friends die, over there. But, maybe you also feel a kind of resentment against yourself—some sort of remorse for surviving when those friends, and your wife, didn’t.”

“What the hell could you possibly know about any of that?” Jackson said, leaning forward.

Peterson held up a hand. “Just bear with me a minute, here.”

Jackson’s shoulders relaxed, a fraction, and he waved for Peterson to go on.

“Jerry didn’t tell me anything about the war,” Peterson continued, “but Sheila told me a little about Troy’s experiences.”

He looked at Mrs. Peterson, raising his eyebrows. She frowned and looked away, but nodded.

“Almost all of it came from flashbacks and dreams that she’d witnessed,” Peterson continued. “Troy talked a lot through these episodes without realizing it. So, Sheila learned
something about what he’d seen and done, but she didn’t know what to do with the things she'd heard. Neither did I, until now, I guess. Hearing you explain things, a little, has kind of helped me put it into some kind of perspective.”

Jackson leaned back against the wall. “Okay. Let’s hear what you’ve got.”

“Well,” Peterson said, tentatively, “let’s look at your life since you came back. Do you remember what you were thinking when you first came off the plane?”

“Relief,” Jackson said, immediately. “I remember feeling complete relief. It was like I’d been holding my breath the whole time I was in country, and now I was suddenly gulping the air like I had almost drowned. It felt like that until we touched down at Travis Air Force Base after a long two-stop flight, that started in Da Nang. We stopped in Japan, then Alaska, and then, finally, in Fairfield, but it wasn’t until we actually came to a full stop and exited the plane that I could finally breathe. And I finally felt safe. But, that didn’t last long.”

Safe was a luxury Jackson hadn’t really felt since before he had first left the States.

“And then?”

“And then I think I was just in a kind of euphoric fog, the first couple of days,” Jackson said. “By the time I got to my parents’ house in Phoenix, though, I was a wreck. I mean, I was really jumping at shadows. I literally ducked when I heard a civilian helicopter or even a low-flying Cessna. You know—I was your basic paranoid freak.”

Jackson recalled that paranoia with a vivid clarity. Those first few weeks stateside, he would walk the streets of his parents’ community nearly every day—and sometimes two or three times a day—whenever he felt restless and jittery and had to get out of the house. And during those jaunts, even small disturbances would trigger the instinctual survival response that he’d learned to trust in Vietnam; a response that was completely useless now that he was stateside,
except as yet another reason for civilians to hate him. The simple backfire of a passing car sounded a hell of a lot like a rifle report, or a small grenade detonating, and he would often find himself diving for cover under his mother’s rosebushes, or behind a convenient tree or a car, on many occasions. Such behavior was not received well by the fine people of Phoenix. He had terrified nearly all the neighbors, and a handful of strangers, within a week of coming home, and he could tell that many of them were beginning to distrust him—eying him with wary and suspicious expressions whenever they saw the olive drab of his jacket approaching.

“What was foremost in your mind on your way to your folks’ house, that day?”

Jackson rubbed his lips and gazed, blindly, down the hallway toward the spot on the living room floor where he knew the dead cop lay, quietly congealing in the darkness.

“I kept imagining the guys going home, too,” he said, in an abstracted tone. “Tripp, Jag, and Bobcat. I imagined them all running into their houses, smiling at their wives, or at their parents and families—so happy to be home. It was an involuntary daydream, really. But, then I’d feel sick to my stomach because I’d realize that none of them would be walking onto American soil at all.”

Jackson shook his head. By the time he had returned home from Vietnam, the remains of his best friends had already been transported to the U.S. in plain, flag-draped coffins. Tripp had been posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor and was subsequently buried at Arlington; Jaguar was buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Colorado, and Bobcat’s cremated remains were inurned in a columbarium at Houston National Cemetery. Jackson was the only survivor of the original, four-man fireteam.

“What were you thinking when you realized you were the only one of your friends left alive?” Peterson said.
Jackson thought, a moment, and then said, “I think I felt—almost embarrassed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, here I was, heading home, my only real injuries being half a missing leg and a scar on the top of my head. I wasn’t dead. I hadn’t sacrificed like those guys had. I hadn’t lost everything like they had. I guess—what I mean is, that I still had hope for a future, but they were all gone. Forever.”

“So, you basically measured, and graded, your loss, and then compared it to theirs?”

“I suppose so, yeah,” Jackson admitted. “I mean, you don’t go into war hoping to die. Everyone expects, or at least hopes, to come out alive.”

In Vietnam, they didn’t measure victory by territory gained, but by the enemy’s body count. Of course, the U.S. soldiers expected that count to be far higher than their own, and that’s what they were ordered to accomplish. They fought to kill, but also to stay alive.

“You hope that you survive one more day,” Jackson continued. “To finally go home—alive. But when you do go home, you almost feel guilty for making it out when your buddies didn’t. Like you didn’t quite do enough, in country, else you’d be dead along with the others.”

“So you did feel—sort of guilty.” Peterson said.

Jackson’s eyes narrowed, and then he blinked. “Yeah. I suppose so.”

“Do you still feel that way, even now?”

Jackson frowned. He supposed he did feel like that, still. He shrugged at Peterson, but nodded in agreement.

“Well, I would bet that guilt affects just about every part of your life,” Peterson said.

“You combine that with your anger, your resentment, your memories and pain, and what are you left with?”
“A guy who can barely function,” Jackson acknowledged.

They were quiet, sitting together, lost in their own thoughts—Jackson rubbing his chin, and Peterson staring at the bulbous curve of his wife’s shoulder as she inhaled and exhaled in long, even breaths.

All three jumped when the phone rang from the floor, next to Jackson.

Chapter 8

Jackson let the phone ring. He was in no mood to deal with Talbot, and there was nothing more he wanted to say to him, at this point, anyway. He and the Petersons weren’t finished, and he wasn’t ready for everything to end, just yet, but he didn’t feel like explaining all of that over the phone. He shrugged at Peterson when the ringing finally ceased, and Peterson shrugged back.

Suddenly there were shouts, outside, and a thump at the front door. Jackson scrambled to his feet, using the wall as leverage to push himself upright when a cramp in the thigh of his bad leg nearly made him tumble backward onto the floor. Something scrabbled at the keyhole and Jackson sucked in his breath when he heard the familiar squeak of the doorknob turning. He raised the Glock, his finger hovering in front of the trigger, and he pointed it down the darkened hall toward the entryway. The door creaked open a few inches.

“Daddy?” a voice called out of the dark.

Outside, Talbot’s voice surged above the broiling commotion. “Miss Taylor! Miss Taylor!”

Jackson exhaled. “Janis? What the hell? You just about got yourself shot!”

Janis pushed the door wider and entered, slamming the door on Talbot’s fury, and shot the bolt. She flicked a light switch, and a dim forty-watt bulb, from the living room lamp, pushed
back the shadows and illuminated her face.

“Jeez, Dad,” she said. “You didn’t even lock the—holy crow!”

Janis looked around the living room, taking in the spent shells, the dead cop, the broken glass, the smell. Jackson watched her nose wrinkle and her eyes widen. He looked at the floor, chagrined, before turning to the Petersons. Their faces had gone white and they clung to one another in a frantic embrace, staring back at Jackson as if the world might open up and swallow them whole.

Jackson looked back at Janis and watched her face run a gamut of emotions before her eyes finally turned down the hall and found him leaning against the wall. Her astonishment turned to troubled worry, and then she looked him up and down, her brows furrowing, and her expression gave way to irritation.


The phone rang, and they all jumped, again. Jackson looked at the receiver and shook his head.

“Daddy?”

“Janis, why did you come here?” Jackson said. “This is not about you, baby.”

“Because I thought maybe I could talk some sense into you,” she answered. “Get you and the Petersons out of here, safely, before someone really gets hurt.” She glanced sidelong at the body on the living room floor, as if she were trying to ignore the implications of that one’s death.

The phone rang again. Jackson bent and snatched the thing from the floor and answered it, grunting and staggering a little when he straightened again. He winced and rubbed at the growing soreness in his leg.

“Dammit, Talbot!” he yelled into the phone. “Did you send my daughter in here, you
Janis moved down the hall, past Jackson, and into her old bedroom. Her eyes widened when she saw the Petersons on the bed.

“You know better than that, Jackson,” Talbot replied, evenly. “We would never do that. She snuck up there when no one was looking. We tried to call her back, but she wouldn’t listen. You’d better not hurt her, Jackson. It won’t go well for you.”

Jackson’s jaw dropped, his face turning red, and he held the phone out from his ear and glared at it. Janis stepped back when he looked up at her. He shook his head, indicating that his anger was not with her.

“You think I’d hurt my little girl, Talbot?” he said when he brought the phone back to his ear. “Don’t you dare to presume anything about me.”

Talbot retorted something, but Jackson let the phone drop to his side, again, and he rubbed his eyes, trying to sort through his thoughts.

After a moment, he spoke again into the mouthpiece. “I need to talk to my daughter a minute, Talbot,” he said. “And then I’m going to send her back out there. You keep your men away from my trailer or I’ll put another bullet in the Petersons, you got me?”

Talbot was silent, for a moment, and then he sighed. “Yeah. Okay, Jackson,” he relented. “I don’t want to see any further hurt to anybody. Make it short.”

“It’ll take as long as it takes, Talbot.” And he hung up.

He looked at Janis. “I need you to do something for me,” he said. “Could you grab us some beers? And some fried chicken? There’s still a twelve-pack in the cooler, I think, and the chicken’s on the top shelf of the fridge. Would you bring that in here? Please?”

Janis hesitated. “You can’t be serious.”
“Look, baby,” he said, putting a gentle hand on her arm. “Nobody in here has had anything to eat or drink for hours. Throw your dad a bone, would you? If not for me, then do it for them,” he said, pointing his gun at the Petersons.

Janis glanced at the hefty couple crowded onto her old bed and her face softened. She nodded and went to the kitchen where she dug through the fridge and pulled out a large red and white bucket with Colonel Sanders’ face emblazoned across the front. She set it on the counter and opened Jackson’s old cooler and pulled out a twelve-pack of Bud Light.

“We don’t drink,” Peterson said.

“Have a beer with me, Peterson. It won’t kill you, and I think you owe me and your brother that, don’t you?”

Peterson looked at his wife, who nodded and threaded her fingers through his. “Go ahead, honey. I don’t mind,” she said, looking at Jackson.

Jackson nodded, a wry grin spreading across his face.

“That’s the spirit,” he said to her.

Janis put the chicken, paper plates, and a stack of napkins onto a serving tray, added a Coke, and then positioned the tray onto one hand and grabbed the twelve-pack with the other. She brought it all to the bedroom and set the tray down onto her old writing desk, the bottles clinking against each other when she placed the beer onto the desk’s matching chair. She set to preparing plates for the Petersons, and Jackson resumed his position on the floor, under the window in the hallway, outside the bedroom.

The Petersons accepted the plates, gratefully, pausing briefly to offer up a quick prayer before biting into the chicken, the ravenous growls of their stomachs echoing through the room in anticipation of the greasy morsels. Janis set a bottle of beer on the nightstand next to Mr.
Peterson, and the Coke on the one next to his wife, before handing a plate and a beer to Jackson.

He gave her a half-smile in gratitude, but Janis blinked and turned away. She placed the bucket on the bed between the Petersons, in case they were hungry for more, and smiled at them apologetically. Opening a beer for herself, she sat down in her old, red beanbag chair, situated in the left corner of the room near the door, and she leaned back, crossing her ankles. She watched the Petersons wolf down their meal, and then turned to Jackson.

“What did you want to say to me, Dad?”

Jackson looked up from his plate, wiping grease from his lips, and scanned her face. She looked scared, but annoyed, too.

“I don’t know,” he said, looking back down at his food. “There isn’t much I can say, is there?”

“Are you implying that all of this is my fault?” she asked, an edge creeping into her voice.

“Of course not. Why would you think that?”


“I never included you in that list.”

“You didn’t have to. It always seemed implied.”

“Well, you weren’t. Included, I mean. I’m sorry I made you feel that you were.”

They were all quiet.

Finally, Jackson set his plate on the floor and took a long pull from his beer.

“I suppose I really didn’t mean to include your mother, either,” he said. “Life with me just turned her sour, I guess.”
“Why did you have to make everything so hard?” Janis said, her voice still edgy.

“I didn’t make it hard. It was hard.” He swallowed. “You can’t understand, Janis. You were too young.”

“I’m not too young now, Daddy,” she said. “Why don’t you talk to me? Tell me why it’s so hard for you?”

Jackson looked at her, the question hanging between them, and then turned to Peterson. Peterson looked back at him and nodded. “Tell her,” he prodded. “Maybe she needs to hear it.”

“I can’t,” Jackson said, hanging his head.

“Have some faith,” Peterson said. “It might not turn out as bad as you think.”

Mrs. Peterson nodded in agreement. “Your daughter might understand better than you think she will.”

“Daddy, don’t you trust me?” Janis pleaded. “Have I ever given you a reason not to?”

Their eyes locked, and tears threatened behind Jackson’s lids.

He shook his head. “You won’t like what you hear, sugar,” he promised. “You might never look at me the same way. And, I don’t know if I can take that. Nam is nothing compared to what I’d feel if you turned away from me for good. It wasn’t pretty over there, baby.”

“I know, Daddy,” Janis said. “I mean, I at least know that much. I’m not completely ignorant of what went on in Vietnam.” Her voice softened. “I just don’t know what’s inside of you.”

Jackson massaged his thigh. He didn’t know how, or where, to start, but time was running out, and he knew that this moment was probably the last he would ever have to clear the air with his daughter—no matter how fearful he was of the consequences.
He sighed. “For the record—I love you, Janis. More than the air I breathe. More than anyone I’ve ever loved. No matter what happens, please know that, and remember it. Okay?”

Janis nodded and leaned forward, propping an elbow on her knee—chin in hand. “Okay. But, you do know that none of this is about the love we have for each other, right?”

Jackson pointed to the foot of the bed and looked at Janis. “There’s a box under there,” he said. “Could you pull it out?”

Janis raised a quizzical brow and reached under the bed skirt. She tugged on a thick rope handle and pulled out a long, wooden, army-green box, grunting against the weight of it.

“What in the world,” she huffed, “is in here?”

“Open it.”

Janis looked at him and shrugged. “Pandora’s box, hmm?”

Jackson smirked and the Petersons leaned forward.

Janis lifted the lid.

Chapter 9

“Toss me another beer, would you?”

Janis handed one to him, and Jackson twisted the lid from the top and gulped down half of it before turning his attention back to the box. He pointed to a thick manila envelope sitting on top of stacks of papers, cardboard boxes, and his old uniform. He nodded.

Janis’s brow worried into a crooked arc. She glanced at Jackson, and then at the Petersons, who also nodded. Encouraged, she pulled the contents from the well-worn packet, settled herself back into the beanbag chair, and set them on her lap. It was a sea of dog-eared, black-and-white photographs. Janis picked one out of the pile, and scrutinized the nameless face
staring back at her. He was a soldier. He appeared to be cleaning his gun—she could see it
disassembled on the table beside him and a piece of it enclosed in his cloth-draped hand. But his
contemplative expression denied any real concentration on his task. She bent closer to the
picture. Jackson was quiet, watchful, and patient.

“Who is he, Daddy?” she said.

Jackson’s gaze dropped from her face to the photograph, and he sighed. “That’s Corporal
Smith.”

“He looks—sort of distracted. I can’t read his expression, though. I mean, it’s not really
sad, but—well—it’s like he’s an old man in a young man’s body.”

Jackson marveled at Janis’s adroit perception.

“He was. We all were, really.”

The Viet Cong were slick, and very hard to find. They often moved at night through
myriad tunnels, where they transported, and hid, supplies, food, and weapons. Or they hid in
plain sight, as villagers living in small hamlets across Southern Vietnam. A G.I. never knew
which villagers were friendly or which were VC in disguise, since they all looked harmless on
the surface. The answer was usually discovered only after a major catastrophe: an American
soldier killed by a small child or an old woman, or by hidden explosives when they conducted
searches of huts and food stores. Even empty encampments were unsafe.

Jackson, Tripp, Bobcat, and Jaguar were leading two squads on a search of an area just a
few clicks east of the Laotian border. The trees began to thin and Jaguar, walking point, signaled
a sighting of hootch roofs, just north of their position. It was coming on dusk, and they’d been
away from base camp for over a month. They were exhausted, begging to turn back and find
someplace to sleep for the night rather than take the time to scour a small gaggle of temporary structures. But Jackson pushed them forward, on the pain of serious repercussions if they were to disobey direct orders. Grumbling, the group slowly moved into a clearing that housed eight living units—obviously an abandoned VC encampment—and they began rifling through supply and food bags and discarded weapons scattered about the camp. Jackson barked at them to be careful, to follow procedure for searches. It was Charlie, after all. Never trust them to leave a camp full of food and supplies without some kind of booby trap hidden somewhere.

Austin Smith was an old hat at this, having been in country for two tours, already. He’d been around, searched his share of villages, and he knew the dangers. He was also a little lazy, in Jackson’s opinion, but he mostly kept his nose clean, and at least did what he was told. But exhaustion has a way of making even the smartest and wisest men do stupid things. Smith grabbed a bag of rice, and instead of sifting through the grains with a slow, purposeful hand, he ripped each bag open, dumped the contents onto the ground, and then tossed the bag aside while he moved on to the next one. Jackson caught Smith’s carelessness out of the corner of his eye, from across the encampment, and he straightened to bellow a sharp order. Too late. Shrapnel shredded Smith’s body when he sliced open the last of fifteen bags, catching the full force of a hidden grenade, and he dropped to the ground in a tattered heap.

Jackson was furious. He’d warned the guys about this, dammit! It was hard enough on him when his men were cut down in a firefight, but when they died as a result of sheer stupidity, it just made him mad. If they couldn’t watch out for themselves, how in the hell was he supposed to keep them alive?

Jackson pointed at Smith’s torn body on the ground, and then he turned a stony eye on his men.
Do you see this? This is what happens when you don’t follow orders! It’s stupid, and it’s a waste of a man.

His words were heartless and cold, but necessary. He had to get their attention. Make them think. Because they were obviously not doing it well enough on their own to keep themselves alive.

We got any body bags? Somebody get this man into a fucking gladbag, would you?

Again: cold and unfeeling. No one carried body bags, of course, and no one moved; tired, pinched faces stared back at Jackson as if he’d lost his mind. His gaze moved from one to the other, his head shaking, his eyes burning into theirs. Still no one budged.

Finally, he barked out an order.

Move! The rest of you finish up the search. I want to go home.

There was a sudden flurry of excitement as soldiers scrambled about the camp, heartened at the sound of finally getting out of the field.

Jackson looked around for the radio operator. When he couldn’t find him he called out in frustration.

Where’s the goddamn RTO?

Finally, he saw the man sprinting from across the camp. When the RTO reached Jackson’s side, he pulled the handset from its perch on his web gear and held it out to Jackson, a sheepish look on his face. Scowling, Jackson snatched it from the patient grunt and turned him around. He switched on the PRC-25, mounted on the guy’s back, adjusted the squelch, and radioed for medevac and transport, tossing the handset back to the RTO after a staticky confirmation.

An hour later, two UH-1C Hueys landed in the clearing, the wind from their rotors
kicking up dead vegetation and scattering debris while the men ran in a half-crouch toward their inviting interiors. The weary troops climbed aboard the vessels and they headed back to base camp. Jackson rode with Austin Smith whose head lay cradled in the arms of a young soldier who was fighting, desperately, not to cry. The poor kid had only been in country for a little under two months, and Jackson had seen an unmitigated terror in his eyes since the day he’d stepped foot into camp. Numerous times, he’d watched him wince whenever a door gunner fired off a few rounds into the jungle below, and he’d heard him cry out, “Oh, God, oh, God,” when he’d mistaken the pop of a twig underfoot for distant enemy fire during basic search missions. Everyone was a little edgy, in Vietnam, but his level of jumpiness made the kid a distinct liability in the field, and Jackson was surprised that it wasn’t already him draped over someone’s lap in a mass of flaccid tissue. He was sure it wouldn’t be long, though, before he was.

Janis looked at Jackson. “That sounds pretty harsh,” she said, her expression earnest, “what you said to those guys.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jackson nodded. “But, don’t think it was easy for me to say. Austin was a pain in the ass, but he was alright. And he was usually pretty smart. But we’d been out there for a long time, and I think he was just exhausted. It was hard to see him go down because of something so stupid. So meaningless.”

“Well, why couldn’t you have just said that, instead of being so insensitive? I’m sure it was just as hard for the other guys as it was for you.”

“‘Sensitive,’” Jackson repeated, his brows drawing together. “Soldiers don’t need sensitive in the bush, Janis. Sensitive gets you killed. Carelessness gets you killed. Me holding the hands of a few offended soldiers wouldn’t have done any of them any good. You had to be
on constant alert, out there. All the time. The things I said, yeah, they were hurtful. And no one wanted to hear it. But, don’t you get it? They had to hear it, or the next time it might have been them, or me, lying there dead—blown up or missing body parts. Because carelessness not only gets you killed, it gets your buddies killed, too. Can you understand that?”

“I’m trying to,” Janis said. After a moment, she continued. “I suppose it makes sense to talk to people that way when you’re at war and lives are at stake. But, truthfully, Daddy—it wasn’t any different at home.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Let’s just say, you never explained why you had problems keeping a job, or why you had nightmares. I mean, you blamed it all on the war, but we didn’t know what that meant, or what happened to you to make everything so hard.”

Jackson stroked his eyebrow and blinked. “I couldn’t explain,” he said.

“You know, Daddy, we were hurting, too—walking on eggshells all the time, figuring out what not to do to set you off. And it was like you didn’t care.”

It was a lot for a kid to carry around. Jackson knew that. He remembered sitting on the living-room sofa, one afternoon, just before Christmas, pretending to read the want ads, but really he had descended deep into South Vietnam—swirling in a melancholy funk of memories. Janis had suddenly burst through the front door, all breathless and beaming, with a pre-adolescent exuberance emanating from her in thick, undulating waves. It was his weekly visitation time, which had been reduced to Fridays for three hours after school. She’d hollered something about getting a big part in the school play, and the front door had slammed against the coat closet with a jarring clatter. In an instant he’d leapt to his feet, and before another heartbeat passed, Jackson had drawn an invisible rifle from over his shoulder and had started shooting at
his twelve-year-old daughter.

He shuddered, glad his weapons had been locked up that day. Although there hadn’t been a real weapon in his hands, the expression on his face must have been terrifying, for Janis’s face had drained of color, her eyes wide and brimming, and she was backpedalling as if she were about to flee. Later that evening, when he was driving her back to her mother’s—long after her tears and quivering had abated—Janis had asked him if he was going to come see her in the play. She was to act the part of Wendy in Peter Pan. Jackson had assured her that he would, knowing full well, even then, that he would end up making an excuse not to go—because he had known what would happen if he did.

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said. “It’s not right that I burdened you like that. That I made you feel so unloved and uncared for. And so scared.”

Janis shook her head. “I never felt unloved by you. I never doubted that part, Daddy. You have to separate that from the rest. I just felt like I was always on the outside of some wall, trying to look in.”

Jackson understood that, and Janis had articulated it well, too. He’d never allowed either his wife or his child to break through the mental Kevlar that he had wrapped around himself, for fear of their horror, judgment, desertion.

“It was all so fresh,” Jackson said. “I know you wanted to hear what was behind the nightmares, the flashbacks, but I didn’t know how to tell you. I couldn’t even face it, myself, let alone share it with you.”

“But, don’t you see? That created a monster barrier between us—”

Jackson’s face reddened, and his voice cracked. “I was afraid. Don’t you get it? I was afraid that if I talked about it I would explode. I couldn’t say out loud the things that were in my
head. And I was afraid of what you would think.”

The words hung between them—pregnant and raw. Neither spoke, and the Petersons shifted uncomfortably on the bed. Jackson knew that his words probably sounded like another excuse to Janis, but they were very real, back then. Even now, thinking about what he’d never said, never revealed, rendered him on edge, shaking and sweating.

Jackson looked at the photo still clamped between Janis’s fingers, and then at another on top of the pile in her lap. He picked it up and stared at it for some time, his brows drawn together and the corners of his mouth turned down—his thumb lightly rubbing the surface.

“Mike Tripp,” he said, finally, and handed Janis the picture.

She took it, but said nothing, waiting. Her eyes never moved from the begrimed face grinning up from its surface.

“One of the best friends I ever had,” Jackson said.

Janis shifted her weight and crossed her legs, Indian-style. She tossed back a swig of beer and said, “Tell me about him?” Her tone was low and tentative.

Jackson sighed and rubbed his jaw.

“Well, we’d been out for about thirty-five days,” he said, “which is a long time in the bush. Everyone was exhausted and we were all beat to shit. And, there were a lot of other platoons that had been out for awhile too, so there were a whole bunch of us that were due for a two-day break.”

“Oh, yeah.” Janis straightened, a little. “I guess there had to be breaks, huh? It’s weird that I never really thought about that before. What did you guys do?”

Jackson sniffed, and his lips skewed into an ironic smirk. “We fought.”
After they left that VC encampment and arrived back at base camp in Tam Ky, Jackson endeavored to stay away from the other grunts in order to be alone with his thoughts, but gave up almost immediately. Solitude was virtually impossible, especially since nearly a hundred G.I.s swarmed the hootches, mess tent, and makeshift showers with unrestrained glee and wide, goofy grins, at the prospect of a couple of days off from the battle lines. He couldn’t blame them. Just a few hours before, most of them had been in the bush, ducking mortar fire and sidestepping land mines at the end of a thirty-five-day “search and destroy” operation that probably felt more like six months of hell. Their respite would only be for a couple of days, but it looked like they intended to make the best of it in full, uninhibited revelry. Ironically, all anyone really wanted to do was sleep after so many days in the field. But, since the break was so short, no one could bring themselves to waste that precious time on the cot, and they carried on into the night—some until the approaching sun lightened the sky just before dawn.

Early the next day, the USO hosted a camp show. An American rock band tramped across a crude stage set before a sea of tanned, shirtless torsos sitting in the dirt to watch. Dozens of G.I.s whooped and hollered at a couple of scantily-clad American girls who writhed and twisted next to long-haired guitarists and drummers who regaled the crowd with the familiar strains of home. Everyone was already sweating in the sticky heat of a South Vietnamese morning, but no one seemed to mind all that much, since they were just happy to be at base camp instead of the swamp, for a change. Or, maybe they were just amazed to be alive. Most likely both.

Drawn by the swell of *Penny Lane* and *Sloop John B* blasting from speakers on either side of the stage, Jackson finally emerged from one of the smaller hootches, dressed in olive-drab fatigues and tucking a dog tag into the neck hole of his t-shirt. It was a habit he’d developed
the first week he’d been in Nam in order to avoid the blinding glint of sunlight reflecting into someone else’s eyes—especially those of hidden NVA or Charlie. He kept the second dog tag threaded onto the laces of his boot and tucked under the flap, since the noise of two dog tags banging together was another way of revealing a G.I.’s position in the field. While there was little reason for this careful practice at base camp, Jackson did it anyway. You could never be too careful, no matter where you were in Vietnam.

He made his way through a throng of bodies in various poses of relaxation. He sauntered past G.I.s reclining on supply boxes and camp chairs, and some seated at long, wooden tables under the shade of army-canvas canopies, each with a fist wrapped around a beer bottle or swilling from a plastic cup filled with various concoctions of God-only-knows-what. He stopped to chat briefly with friends he recognized, and then continued on his way, nodding at some, smirking at others.

Halfway to the stage, Jackson skirted a spirited wrestling match, turning back to watch when raucous laughter bellowed from a small group of on-lookers surrounding two men grappling in the dust like a couple of kids. The spectators were laughing, but no one really begrudged the guys an engagement in the familiar, regressive decompression methods of an American grunt during brief moments of R&R. They egged the fighters on with shrill whistles and loud whoops, calling out encouraging suggestions, or cheering in unison when one or the other got the upper hand.

Someone called out to the crowd.

*My money’s on McGill, ya’ll. Ain’t nobody can beat him in a wrassling match.*

The man’s accent was thick, smacking of the Deep South, and he waved American MPC notes in the air over his head, taking bets with “yee-haws” and “ooh-wees” while the wrestlers
strained against one another, their boots digging into the loamy earth.

Jackson grinned and took the bet. Whoever this McGill was, he didn’t stand a chance.

Somehow Jackson had recognized Tripp’s florid complexion—concealed as it was beneath a thick layer of dust mixed with sweat—and he shook his head, rolling his eyes at the southerner’s misplaced declaration. Tripp wasn’t a big guy, but he was the best damn hand-to-hand fighter Jackson had ever seen. Boxing, wrestling, karate, or an all-out brawl; it didn’t matter how you came at him, Tripp was going to win. Oh, he’d make a big show of it, letting his opponent get in a shot or two, like the guy might actually have a chance of getting one up on him, but the challenger’s real chance was pretty much zero to none.

Jackson eyed the crowd. The gathering had nearly doubled in size, since he’d stopped to watch, and the scattered shouts and yips had escalated to a thunderous pitch. MPCs, American dollars, and even a few Vietnamese đồng exchanged hands in quick succession, promising to fatten wallets no small amount when the fight was over. Jackson’s attention returned to the action and he crossed his arms, watching Tripp squirm out of a good choke hold by pushing out with his feet to square up against McGill’s chest in a classic Gazzoni wrestling move. McGill reached over Tripp’s shoulder from behind, trying to maintain the upper hand, and Tripp grabbed the man’s wrist with his right hand and extended his left arm skyward, exerting painful pressure on the back of McGill’s elbow. Utilizing the hold to his advantage, Tripp forced McGill over onto his knees, and his forehead into the dirt.

The crowd roared. It was a fantastic maneuver, and Tripp bared his teeth in triumph, ready to finish it. Before he could turn his opponent over for a pin, however, McGill slithered out from under him and came up with an uppercut that rocked Tripp’s head backward, and split his lip.
Tripp dabbed at his swelling mouth, his fingers coming away smeared with a bit of blood. He glared at McGill, his brow lifting in a puzzled arc.

*What the hell?*

So much for a friendly wrestling match.

Looking on, Jackson’s grin faltered and the crowd quieted. The two men stood like ravenous lions, glaring and snarling at each other, and then Tripp’s fist shot out, connecting with McGill’s chin in a meaty *thwack*. He followed it with a left hook that dropped McGill back to the ground, where he groaned on hands and knees, spitting bright strings of blood into the dirt. Tripp wiped blood from his own lips, and toed McGill in the ribs.

*Get up, you piece of shit. You want to box? We’ll box, then.*

Jackson shook his head at Tripp in friendly warning.

*Take it easy, Tripp.*

Tripp’s eyes were locked onto his new enemy.

*He started this, Jax. This was a fair wrestling match until just about thirty seconds ago.*

McGill’s fists were up, his lungs heaving, and he paced back and forth before his rival, finally thrusting the whitened knuckles of one hand toward Tripp’s face—missing when Tripp ducked the shot and returned fire. A renewed frenzy ripped through the spectators, and a cheer went up when McGill’s head snapped back with the force of three quick jabs from Tripp’s expert fists, rocking McGill’s skull like an inverted speed bag.

Tripp bounced on the balls of his feet.

*You about done, cupcake?*

McGill growled and darted forward, his arm swinging in an empty arc when Tripp again dodged the punch and threw another of his own, landing his opponent back into the dirt.
McGill held up a hand in spent surrender. A handful of G.I.s cheered and a few others groaned, and there was an audible shuffle as bets were paid off and backs were slapped in the sport of the morning.

Tripp offered his hand to help McGill up, then clapped the man’s shoulder when he got to his feet. Tripp smirked.

*You alright, McGill?*

McGill made a face, but accepted Tripp’s handshake and walked away, rubbing his jaw and swiping at the blood still oozing from his mouth. Jackson caught Tripp’s eye and grinned.

*Nice fight, my friend. Want to go catch some of the band?*

Janis rolled her eyes. “Sounds like a little too much testosterone, to me,” she snickered.

Jackson shrugged. “It’s what we did to unwind, sometimes,” he said. “And it was all in good fun. That’s not something we got a lot of, in country. In fact, it was pretty rare. And, I guess, we took it where we could get it.”

Janis’s face grew serious. “Tell me how you felt, Daddy,” she said, her tone cautious. “I mean, you know, most the time that you were there. What was it like? Were you scared?”

Jackson’s forehead wrinkled and he looked into her eyes. “Yeah, I was scared,” he said. “Even when we were supposed to be relatively safe, like that day when the band played, I just—I just never felt completely at ease. Like I was afraid snipers were just going to start shooting at me from out of nowhere.”

When a soldier was there, in the middle of a war, there always seemed to be a feeling that someone was hiding—waiting behind him, or behind a tree, or behind the hootches, or in the latrine. Waiting until he walked by so they could ambush him and cut his throat, or shoot him, or
toss a grenade at him.

“I would sometimes get this irrational fear at night,” Jackson continued, “trying to fall asleep on my cot, thinking that the guy in the next cot over was actually a Viet Cong insurgent just waiting for me to fall asleep so he could jump me. Or sometimes, I thought that maybe he was just a regular Joe that had finally snapped and was going to wake up one night and just start shooting everything in sight.”

“But—nothing like that ever happened, right?” Janis said.

“No, not really. Not to us, anyway. Like I said, it was irrational.”

Janis frowned. “I don’t know about it being irrational. Like you said, you guys were in a war. I don’t guess any fear was completely irrational.”

Jackson gave her a half smile, encouraged by her insight. “I guess not,” he agreed. “And I suppose the fear about one of our guys losing his mind and unloading on us might have come from a couple of fragging incidents that I couldn’t get out of my head.”

“Fragging?”

“When an officer’s mowed down by one of his own guys in the field. But, I guess I’m using it in the broader sense of killing anyone on our own side—not just an officer.”

Janis was incredulous. “Soldiers killed their own men?” she said, in almost a whisper. “My God.”

“I’m sure most of the time it was an accident,” Jackson assured her. “Like, in friendly fire.”

“And the other times?”

“I don’t know.” Jackson shrugged. “I only heard stories.”

Janis looked uncertain. “So, what happened, then, to make you so paranoid about the
guys in camp?” she asked, tentatively.

Jackson lit a cigarette and a long, blue curl of smoke floated up from the end of it as he leaned forward, took a drag, and rubbed his eyebrows. She would hate him if she knew the truth. But, now that he’d begun, he couldn’t hold things back, anymore. He supposed he had to trust her all the way, or not at all.

Jackson took a deep breath, and then exhaled in a long, loud sigh.

“It was chaos, that day, really,” he said. “Guys were being blown up left and right, and I could hardly see through all the smoke everywhere. I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to make it out of there alive, that time.”

Chapter 10

Since the American goal was to eradicate the North Vietnamese Army—to diminish their numbers enough to cancel their threat to South Vietnam—American ground troops were ordered to stop a regiment of over two thousand strong from retreating westward into Cambodia where war policy disallowed the U.S. Army to follow and make good on their mission. It was just before dawn, and Jackson’s platoon was closing in on where the NVA troops were hidden, near the top of a steep hill, only a few klicks from the Cambodian border. For three days ARVN and Americans had battled the NVA, munitions ravaging the hillside, rendering the trees near the base of the hill to mere splinters, and the ground to a maze of pockmarked craters. Now, it was something like wandering into a devastated ghost town. Moving upward, there was very little to hide behind at first, as it had all been demolished, and smoke billowed over the entire hillside, making it difficult for Jackson and his men to distinguish one man from the other: NVA from American, or American from decimated tree.
Before long, Jackson’s platoon was pushing upward into a heavily wooded area that turned out to be a considerably buttressed NVA stronghold, complete with trenches and fortified bunkers. On their way in, picking their way silently through the dense foliage, he heard several of the others whispering about bodies they were seeing, one after another—barely discernible in the smoke and the dim light of the pre-dawn haze. Still, they pushed on, hearing artillery shells bursting ahead and machine-gun reports all around them, and by daybreak they were in the thick of it.

Men fought, and men died. Even the supply choppers were shot at, and some of them were even gunned down by the NVA before they could drop their load, their rotors fragmenting overhead into pieces that rained down on the heads of soldiers on the ground. And then the birds would plummet downward, and their fuel tanks would ignite upon impact when they hit the jungle floor—black smoke pluming from the wreckage. The “friendly” body count was mounting, along with the number of wounded, and the troops decided they needed to find a way to rout the enemy. It was time to employ the flamethrowers.

Jackson assembled a few men from each platoon into the rear camp where he instructed those not already familiar with the flamethrower on how to mix the fuel and operate the weapon effectively. Soldiers labored around pots of gasoline into which they added powdered napalm. Gently, they stirred the mixture with long tree branches, and then poured the contents through a tin funnel into one of the two tanks fitted onto the special frame pack. Ensuring that the twin propane tank was full, someone hoisted the apparatus onto the shoulders of the hapless soldier designated to carry the device, and handed him the igniter wand.

They moved up the hill toward the fighting, ready to spray swaths of napalm-laced gasoline onto trees and vegetation in order to force the NVA from hiding whenever the
opportunity presented itself. Several men peeled away, heading toward the sound of rifle fire further up the hill while Jackson trudged forward. Tripp and Bobcat flanked him, spraying bursts from their M-16s at what looked like NVA in the trees. Tripp motioned to Jackson that he and Bobcat were going around a blackened, dilapidated bunker that ARVN had razed earlier that morning to make sure it was secure. Jackson acknowledged him with a nod and scanned the trees in a full circle as they moved away—there was no one else nearby that he could see. He crouched with his ’sixteen pointed outward from his hip and inched his way northeast, listening for movement. He whirled, suddenly, when a hand came down on his shoulder from behind, and he fired, point blank, into the chest of his assailant.

_Oh—Lord._

The phrase squeaked out of the ashen face of the young man whose lap Austin Smith’s head had rested on in the bird that day, east of Laos. Kirk, was his name. Kirk from Cleveland.

Jackson whispered the same words back at him.

_**Oh, Lord.**_

His eyes widened when Kirk’s fingers clawed at his flak jacket, pulling Jackson down on top of him when he fell to forest floor. Jackson scrambled to his knees and leaned over him while the kid clutched at his chest where the bullet had entered. Jackson pushed him over onto his side, inspecting the back side of his jacket, and then rolled him back over again.

Kirk looked up at him, his eyes almost amused.

*I—I think you shot me, Lieutenant.*

The bullet had gone clean through, since the range had been so close, and Jackson prayed that it hadn’t hit any vital organs.

*I know. Just hang tight, and I’ll get a medic in here.*
But when he tried to get up, Kirk grabbed the bottom of Jackson’s web gear and held him there.

*I’m not afraid anymore, Lieutenant. You tell them I wasn’t afraid, when I died.*

Jackson sat back on his heels.

*I don’t think you’re going to—*

He faltered, knowing that he was only saying the words out of kindness and a tiny thread of hope.

*Just tell them. Please.*

Something inside of Kirk had ruptured; he coughed and blood gushed from his mouth in a dark red spray. Jackson lifted Kirk’s head and pulled the kid’s upper torso onto his thighs and rocked him.

*I’m so sorry, kid. I thought you were NVA. Shit! I’m so sorry. Oh, God. Don’t die, man.*

*I’ll get you some help, just don’t die!*

But Kirk was gone.

And Jackson was the one who had killed him.

Stinging tears gathered in his eyes and he pushed himself to his feet, Kirk’s upper body sliding from his lap and tumbling back into the grass. The kid’s head rolled like a newborn’s on his young, rubber-band neck, before finally coming to a rest against a gnarled tree root.

Jackson stared at Kirk’s body. Mortar shells exploded in the distance, and the rapid staccato of AK-47s blatted in muted bursts toward the top of the hill, followed by the rattle of M-16s. Amid shouts and screams, the hollow *thwoomp* of an American LAW rocket launcher echoed through the jungle, and the smoke of napalm, burning the bunkers and trenches, blackened the sky overhead and permeated the wet air.
Jackson bent down and gently closed Kirk’s eyes.

*Rest in peace, little man.*

He straightened, took a deep breath, eyed the jungle, and moved away.

No one spoke. No one seemed to know what to say. Jackson doused his cigarette in an empty beer bottle and leaned back against the wall.

Finally, Peterson shifted his weight on the bed, wincing when he pushed himself higher against the wall.

“How happened when they found out you’d shot the kid?” he asked.

“They didn’t,” Jackson replied, turning away. “So much happened that day, and the next two, that by the time all the dead and wounded were medevaced out of there, well—hell, it was the fifth day since American and ARVN troops had first arrived on that fucking hill, and we were all beat to shit. No one even bothered to ask any questions. There were just too many guys to pull out of there.”

After they had chased the NVA off the hill, a bird finally showed up with supplies, loaded with water and C-rats, and a shit-load of body bags. In total, they’d lost nearly two-hundred men in that operation, and who knows how many ARVN, and they spent that whole fifth day loading them all into bags while the medics attended the wounded. Until the medevac choppers got there, there wasn’t a lot that could be done for them: the guys that were suffering. All they had was the morphine they carried, and they must have used up dozens of the little ampules trying to keep the guys from screaming. And then it took all of the sixth day to get them all out of there.

Jackson was rambling, and he knew it.
“You mean, you didn’t report it?” Janis asked, her voice low and even, and her eyes narrowed.

“Look, it was crazy out there,” Jackson said, the words gushing forth in a torrent. “There was mortar fire and rifle shots, and shelling all around you—bullets zinging over your head, and smoke blurring your eyes, and shadows in the trees that were probably the enemy, but they could have been your own guys, but you couldn’t tell who was who, and all you could do was fire back when you heard the rifle sounds or when you saw a muzzle-flash in the haze. It was mayhem, and there was shit going on everywhere, and I thought he was the enemy sneaking up behind me to cut my throat! Dammit! What else was I supposed to do?”

“So you didn’t report it, then,” Janis pressed.

Jackson looked up at her, searching her eyes for an indication of anger, or disgust, or some other sign of whatever she might be thinking. But, her face was unreadable.

“No,” he said, finally, dropping his gaze. “I didn’t. There was no point.”

“I’m sure his parents didn’t feel that way,” Janis said, coldly.

Jackson flinched. He’d told himself the same thing over and over again. And each time he’d convinced himself that it didn’t matter how Kirk had died. It mattered that he was dead. Would knowing that it was due to friendly fire make it easier for his parents to cope with his death? No. Would it bring the kid back? No. Would it change the outcome of the war? No. And maybe least important—or most important, however you wanted to look at it—would it be worth being court-martialed and hauled off to spend the rest of his life at Leavenworth for something that was just a horrible accident? No. Most definitely, no.

But how could he say all that to Janis without making himself sound like the piece-of-shit he thought he was inside his head? He’d never revealed Kirk’s story to anyone before, and he
wasn’t really sure how to go about explaining it in a way that didn’t make him sound like a self-serving prick.

“No, I’m sure they didn’t,” he replied. “I’ve thought about that a lot, you know. Telling them. Telling someone. But I kept wondering how that knowledge could really help anyone without really stirring up a big kettle of worms. I mean, let’s say I report it now. What do you think is going to happen?”

“Well—” Janis thought a moment. “They might get some closure to help them reconcile their son’s death.”

“Okay,” Jackson tested. “Aside from the fact that I hate that stupid term: fricking ‘closure’—what the hell does that really mean? Anyway, that aside, how might that work, in your mind?” He shrugged at Janis, digging again at the stubborn hangnail on his thumb. He kept his eyes on hers. “Let’s say they get a visit from the Army, one day, and Mister and Mrs. Kirk hear the wonderful news that their son really didn’t die bravely in battle, with the rest of the heroes, but instead he was mown down—on accident, mind you—by one of his own goddamn army buddies! You think they’d be grateful for that information? Do you think they’d hug each other and say, ‘Boy! I’m really glad we know the truth, now? Whew, it’s so much better now that we know his life was wasted over there, thousands of miles from home.’ Is that what you’re thinking?”

Janis’s brows drew together, once again, visibly angry now. But after a moment, her face softened, a fraction, and she looked away from Jackson and turned her gaze on the Petersons, as if she were putting them in the place of Kirk’s parents while she contemplated what Jackson had said.

Peterson answered for her. “You might be right about Kirk’s parents,” he said to Jackson.
“But, what about you? How do you deal with it? How are you supposed to get past it if you aren’t honest about it with someone?”

“I’m not,” Jackson admitted. “I didn’t. I mean, I haven’t gotten past it, I guess. I think about the look on that kid’s face, *every day*. His expression after I shot him. I couldn’t get it out of my head if I wanted to.” He blinked, hard, and shook his head, his brows drawing together. “And, believe me, admitting what happened to my superiors, or to his parents, is not going to make that go away. It would cause a bunch of trouble for the Army—maybe get a few people into a lot of hot water, after all these years, and it would hurt Kirk’s parents, and it might land me in jail, and all for what? This so-called ‘closure,’ you all are so fond of talking about?” He shook his head, again, his eyes moving from the Petkersons to Janis. “There’s no fucking closure for something like this. There’s no magic trick, or special pill, that can make it all go away. So, you tell me. Who the fuck would it help to say anything to anyone?”

Peterson and Janis were quiet.

And then the phone rang, making them all jump—Mrs. Peterson’s hand flying to her ample bosom with an “Oh!”

Chapter 11

“Wonderful,” Jackson said, and answered it. “What do you want, Talbot?”

“I need to know everything is alright in there,” Talbot said. “I have a job to do, Jackson.”

“We’re just peachy, Chief,” Jackson replied. “Having a little chat and getting some things hashed out in here, do you mind?”

“Yeah, I do mind. This isn’t a joke, Jackson. We need to put this thing to bed.”

“I’ll finish when I finish, Talbot. You—”
Janis had rolled out of the beanbag chair when the phone rang, and now she stepped over to Jackson and snatched the phone from his hand.

“Mr. Talbot?” she breathed into the mouthpiece.

She’d lowered her voice into what Jackson recognized as her I’m-going-to-wrap-you-around-my-little-finger tone.

“It’s Janis,” she said. “Yes. Everything is just fine. Look, I know you want this to be over, and I do, too. But, I just need to talk to my dad for a little while longer. I think this can end peacefully, and with everyone intact, and I—”

She paused and listened.

Jackson pushed himself up from the floor, wincing when the blood rushed to the end of his stump where it seemed to be pooling like a fat tick. He’d been wearing his prosthesis for far too long and the skin was tightening below the knee and squeezing against the hard inner surface of the thing. Shaking his head as if that would dispel the ache, Jackson limped to the hall window and drew the curtain aside just enough to peer outside.

There were more government vehicles than before: step-vans and sedans, all parked at jagged angles in the street adjacent to his driveway. The whole area—from the road and extending around both ends of his trailer and back behind it, where he couldn’t see—had been cordoned off by a streamer of yellow crime tape, visible in the glare of the floodlights, and fluttering like butterfly wings from a light, Arizona summer breeze that had sprung up. Jackson spied a mint-green Porta Pottie situated toward the back of one of the SWAT vans, and an ironic scowl twisted one corner of his mouth. How spoiled was civilian life when even after only a few hours, privacy trumped convenience in a demand to have somewhere other than someone else’s backyard to pee in? Jackson thought about how many times he’d been out in the bush and had to
take a shit there with nothing more comfortable than a Kapok tree to lean against, and often nothing to wipe up with, afterward, either.

Jackson spotted Talbot, phone to his ear, talking into the mouthpiece, and gesticulating to a small group of SWAT members who darted away, presumably to somewhere behind the trailer.

Things were going to start getting dicey, here, soon.

“Yes, Mr. Talbot,” Janis continued. “I understand.” She looked at the Petersons. “Yes, they’re fine. Everyone’s a little tired, but we’re all fine. Please just give us a little more time. I promise everything will be okay. We’ll all walk out of here together. Peacefully. Yes. That’s right. Thank you, sir. Goodbye.”

Janis pressed “END” and handed the phone to Jackson. “We’ve got a little more time, anyway.”

He looked at her, released the curtain, and took the handset. And then he eyed the Petersons. There was a marked change in his captives’ countenance. Peterson had straightened, a little, pulling his wife back into the circle of his arms, and Mrs. Peterson looked more alert and significantly more hopeful—patting her husband’s chest with an unspoken optimism swimming in her eyes. Jackson sincerely hoped that Janis’s promise to Talbot had not been made in vain—that Talbot’s crew didn’t become overeager and trigger-happy.

Janis passed out another round of beers, and even Mrs. Peterson took one, a faint look of gratitude etching her weary features.

“Okay.” Janis resumed their discussion, and her place on the beanbag. “So, I’ll give you that telling the truth about that incident might not be as simple as I thought.” She frowned, looking askance at Jackson. “Did you run into that kind of thing all the time?”

“No,” he said. “That only happened once in our brigade. That I know of, anyway.”
Although, I did hear stories about it happening to other guys elsewhere in the war.”

He moved back into the room and carefully lowered himself to the floor, sweat beading up on his forehead against the throb in his leg. He took a drink from his beer and looked at Peterson. He thought he actually saw a glimmer of sympathy in the man’s expression, and his brow arched in wonder.

“Well, I’m certainly beginning to see where your nightmares come from,” Janis said, drawing Jackson’s attention back to the conversation. “But I’m still a little fuzzy about the flashbacks. I mean, it’s not like there are a lot of people wandering around town carrying automatic rifles and hand grenades to remind you of the war.”

Jackson took a deep breath, and then exhaled, loudly. “Flashbacks happen, sometimes, often when you least expect them,” he said. “And the triggers are not always the same, or the same thing is not always a trigger every time.”

“I don’t understand.”

Jackson thought a moment, trying to think of how to explain it in a way that Janis could understand. “Well, let’s see. Take Jung-su, for example.”

“Mom’s gardener.”

“Yeah. On any given day I could see him in the garden—even talk to him—and I would be fine. And then on another day, just the sight of him would make my skin crawl, and I’d feel like I was back in Nam. And, I’d swear I could hear choppers in the air, and the sound of machine guns popping.”

The flashbacks felt nearly as real as if he were truly back there in the bush—inhaling the fruity smell of the jungle; the napalm; the acrid odor of singed hair and the sugary aroma of burning flesh. And the residue clung to him long after the flashback was over and he’d settled
back into reality.

“Jung-su may have been Korean,” he continued, “but during a flashback, he was nothing but Charlie.”

“Do you still have them now? The flashbacks?”

“Not as often as back then,” Jackson said, “but, yeah.”

“Well, that’s some kind of progress, anyway,” Janis said, sighing. “So, I guess the question now is: what can I do to help?”

Jackson contemplated that, but Janis wasn’t finished. She licked her lips and continued.

“I mean, you tell me all these crazy stories about Vietnam,” she said, “and I hear what you’re saying, and I get that it was hard. I’m trying to put myself in your place—trying to think like you were thinking, and feel what you were feeling, then. And how you might be thinking and feeling now. But, I think you have the power to change a lot of things for yourself just by choosing to. You can make the choice to be happy, Daddy, and the choice to go out and live your life and not allow the past to dictate what you do every day. Maybe that’s an over-simplification of such a difficult thing, but there has to be some kind of merit in it, right?”

Jackson was shaking his head. Surely she knew that if it were that simple, he would have done it already. He had tried, so many times, and in so many different ways: booze, illegal drugs, support groups, psychotherapy, antipsychotic drugs. The list was long, and the result was the same for each method. The nightmares still woke him up nights. The flashbacks still raged through his days.

“I hear what you’re saying, sugar,” he said. “I do. And I know that most of what I’ve told you about trying to fix my problems seems like a cop out to you. And maybe some of it even is. For the most part, though, I really have tried. And I wish there were a switch that could turn the
bad stuff off, or turn me off, sometimes.” He rubbed the sides of his head with his palms. “God, that sounds stupid when I verbalize it like that. But, what I mean is, it’s overwhelming and exhausting. Why would anybody choose not to let it go, if they had the power to do it?"

She couldn’t possibly imagine how taxing it was to dream every night—not the odd things most people dream about—but convoluted, half-remembered, distorted nightmares of the jungle, and the VC, and the NVA, and sometimes even Janis among them. And there was no way she could understand how mentally crippling it was to go out somewhere in broad daylight and hear something, or smell something, or see something that instantly catapulted him back to the Elephant Grass, and the sticky, muddy rivers and thick marshes that tried to suck the jungle boots right off his feet, all the while ducking enemy fire.

“How mortifying it is when a flashback happens and someone’s standing right there to witness it. I can tell you, it’s not easy seeing the disgust in your neighbor’s face when you explain to him that you’d heard sniper fire across the street, and that’s why you just tackled his wife to the ground.”

“Oh, Lord. Did that really happen?” Janis’s eyes widened.

Jackson nodded. They had been trained to be ready, like that—to fly into instant action whenever they perceived a threat. That was their job in Vietnam. They lived it, breathed it, ate it, and slept with it, every night. It was ingrained so deep that they didn’t even recognize it was happening until they were already rolling on the ground, or rubbing a bruised knee after diving for cover.

“Christ,” Jackson said. “I wish for once I would just sit there and pick my nose when I heard a car backfire outside my door. Something as simple as that should be easy to remember as a safe sound, don’t you think? I mean, if they can train it in, why in the hell can’t they just train it
back out, again?”

Jackson rubbed his palms against his eyes. It all seemed so futile. Everything he’d said and done, today, closed in on him in a black cloud. He suddenly realized he had zero future to look forward to. He couldn’t have regular friends, or go to football games or concerts, or have barbeques on the deck. And, he couldn’t date, and he certainly couldn’t ever marry again, simply because he knew it would end in disaster. It just wouldn’t be fair to make another woman deal with all of the shit he’d put Lo through, or to put her kids through what Janis had endured.

“So, you were good friends with—Tripp, was it?” Janis asked. “And this Jaguar guy? What were they like?”

Jackson looked up at Janis, startled at the sudden shift in subject. It was as if she’d known the direction into which his thoughts were drifting, and was trying to redirect his focus.

He looked at the Petersons. They were silent, but appeared to be listening with genuine interest. Mrs. Peterson took a swig of beer, and nestled closer to her husband. She pushed another errant curl from her eyes and waited for Jackson to answer Janis’s question.

Jackson looked at the pile of photos, now on the floor at Janis’s feet, and rifled through them, for a moment, before he picked out three. He leaned back against the wall, fanning them out in his hand, and he stared at them, his lips thinning into a grim line. Finally, he handed one to Janis.

“That’s Tripp and me in one of the South Vietnamese villages about a month before he was killed,” he said. “We got to know some of the people in a few of those villages pretty well. The old woman standing next to Tripp is Mai, and the younger one next to me is her daughter, Kieu. And this one,” he said, handing her the second photo, “is Jaguar and me at the camp show the day that Tripp duked it out with McGill.”
Janis scrutinized the second picture, her face softening and a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “God,” she said. “Look how young you were.”

Jackson nodded. “Yeah. I was twenty in that picture.”

“I’m sorry you lost so many friends in Vietnam, Daddy,” she said. “I can’t imagine what that feels like.”

“It feels like hell,” he said. “And sometimes, even after all these years, every now and then it just jumps out and grabs you by the balls with a tight little squeeze.”

“I’m sure it must.”

Janis looked at the photo of Jackson and Jaguar, again. “You look a little sleepy-eyed in this picture. Were you—were you drunk?” she asked, smirking.

Jackson made a face. “Yeah, I was.”

Janis nodded, as if she’d expected as much.

Jackson’s brows drew together. It was obvious Janis thought he had always been a drinker. And why shouldn’t she? She’d seen him tie one on, on many occasions. He didn’t drink all the time, comparatively speaking, but when he did, it was always to get drunk. To be numb, for awhile. And sometimes the binge would last for a couple of days at a time. It hadn’t ever really worked, though. Certainly it fogged up his brain, for a time, but not enough to dispel the memories circling around his head, diving in at him like a flock of angry buzzards. Jackson couldn’t even begin to think what Janis must have thought of him during those times when he was stumbling around the house, laughing, crying, singing off-key. And then, as always, he would wind up in the den with his box of memories and the love-hate emotions they conjured. Sobbing and holding conversations with friends long dead.

Janis had no way of knowing how different a man he was, back in the days of those
“It was the first time I’d ever been drunk,” he explained.

“Really?” Janis looked surprised, but also a little skeptical.

“Yeah. The mail came that day.”

Janis waited.

Jackson looked at her. “It was a letter from my girl, back home. Cheryl.”

“What did she say?”

He shrugged. “That she was getting married.”

“Oh. Wow. I’m sorry.”

Jackson waived it off. “It was a long time ago. She was my first, so I guess it hit me kind of hard. We were supposed to get married when I got back from Nam.”

It happened a lot. Young men would leave home full of promises and well-wishes from pretty young things. They went off to war, and into battle, and they became soldiers and men, overnight—thoughts of their girls back home sometimes the only thing getting them through the day. A lot of the guys kept pictures of their girlfriends or wives strapped to the inside of their helmets, or wrapped in a plastic bag and stuffed into the bottom of their rucksacks. They would take these out during a lull in the fighting to look at them—to remind themselves that they were still human. That they planned to get home, get married, start a family, and go back to being normal. But, then the fated letter would come. That cliché, “Dear John” dirge that stabbed nearly as deep as any bayonet could in the bush.

Janis looked, again, at the picture of Jackson and Tripp with the Vietnamese villager women. She held the photo up and pointed to a little girl balanced on Kieu’s hip. “Look at that sweet little face,” she said, and then, “Oh! What happened to her leg?”
Jackson took the picture from Janis and smiled. “That’s little Hien, Kieu’s daughter,” he said. “She lost part of her leg from some kind of illness.”

“What was she like? What were they all like?”

Jackson still thought about that day, sometimes—the image clear and fresh in his mind, as if it were only yesterday. Poor little Hien. He remembered how quiet and unsmiling she was. She couldn’t play like the other children, who were laughing, skipping and dancing around, that day, afraid to get closer to the G.I.s, but wanting to because they knew that American soldiers carried treats.

Finally, one brave soul—his face and clothing begrimed from working in the paddies—had stepped forward and planted himself in front of Tripp, pulling on the hem of his jacket, and beaming up at him with a meaningful expression. Tripp had chuckled and handed the boy some chocolate, tousling his hair and chucking him under the chin. The boy had turned toward his friends, holding the chocolate high, as if it were the finest nugget of gold in all the land. Before long, Tripp was surrounded, the children bouncing around him with their arms waving and their faces eager.

And all Hien could do was sit on the ground and watch, her little face drawn into a deep frown. Jackson had felt sorry for her, and after awhile he pushed past Tripp, and the crowd of kids around him, and sat down beside her.

“She was a sad little thing,” he said to Janis. “I think I spent nearly half an hour having a conversation with myself because she wouldn’t talk to me at all, at first. Finally, I gave her a little locket that I’d found in a little shop in Saigon. I had planned to send it to Cheryl.”

Janis made a face, and Jackson smirked. “Well, there was certainly no point in my sending it to her now, since that boat had sunk,” he continued. “And what else was I going to do
with it? It was really only a little memento, but the look on that kid’s face—shit, it nearly did me in, I can tell you that.”

Janis’s head cocked to the side, and a look of wonder came over her face. Hearing him express such tenderness out loud was a side of Jackson he knew she had seldom seen.

“So, you gave her the necklace, and then what happened?”

“Her mother kissed me,” Jackson said, his face falling. “Right here.” He brushed a finger against the hollow of his cheek, now overgrown with two days’ worth of stubble.

Janis said nothing.

“Those were the kinds of things that happened a lot with the villagers,” Jackson continued, “in the beginning—back before we’d learned not to trust any of them.”

He looked at the Petersons, his tone dripping with rancor. “A few weeks after that day,” he said, “our platoon, and three others, were leaving that same village—heading out on one of the paths that led deeper into the jungle—when someone tripped a land mine that killed four G.I.s, instantly. We weren’t yet a hundred fucking yards from the village perimeter.” His face twisted into a sneer. “And those fucking villagers hadn’t said a word. Not one word! No warning at all. No suggestion to go a different way. Nothing.” Jackson shook his head. “It made no sense. Especially after what we’d done for them. And it was demoralizing, man. It finally got to the point where we just didn’t trust any of them, anymore.”

He shook his head, again. The soldiers had lost patience with the lot of them, and had started looking at the South Vietnamese in the same way they looked at the VC, and the NVA. And, before long, every soldier they lost was blamed on the villagers’ damnable silence.

Janis sighed, and Jackson looked up at her. She gave him an encouraging smile and nodded for him to continue.
He could see that his memories of Vietnam were not easy for her to hear—especially the more graphic ones—and he noted a distinct weariness settling into her eyes. Nevertheless, time was growing short, something they were all very aware of, and Talbot would be calling again, soon. There was still much that needed to be said, things he wanted Janis to know before—well, before it all ended. He wasn’t sure they would get this opportunity again.

Jackson took a deep breath and exhaled in an enervated sigh. “See,” he resumed, “the thing was that it was our job to help the citizens of South Vietnam. I mean, they were the sole reason why we were over there fighting and dying. It was supposed to be all for them.” He made a face. “Hell, President Johnson made damn sure that everyone was perfectly clear on our purpose in Nam—to the soldiers as well as the American citizens. And the Army brass reminded us, too, whenever it seemed like we were losing focus on that goal.”

Jackson scratched the scar on his head, and Janis looked at him gravely.

“But sometimes,” he continued, “it felt like the people we were protecting just didn’t seem to care about what we were sacrificing for them. We would be in their village talking to them, joking around, making them smile and laugh. We would hold their children, and give them chocolates and little trinkets, and all for what?” Jackson nodded his head. “Betrayal, that’s what.”

Jackson tapped a finger against his temple. “It was a very confusing point in the war. For everybody.”

“But, you obviously still trusted some of them,” Peterson noted. “Or else you never would have married Hoa.”

Janis’s head jerked upward. “What?” she gasped, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. “You were married before mom?”
Chapter 12

Jackson frowned at Peterson, who shrugged innocently.

Jackson had never told Janis, or her mother, about his previous marriage. At first it had been mostly because he couldn’t talk about her without descending into a depressive funk. And then later, he just didn’t see the point, and no one had asked. To him, it was like he’d led two discriminate lives, as if that Jackson in Vietnam were a whole separate person from the one at home.

And now Peterson had opened up a carefully buried can of worms.

Jackson looked at Janis, carefully. “Yes,” he admitted.

He waited for her to digest this newest revelation.

She thought for a long time, and then nodded her head, slowly, as if puzzle pieces were falling into place.

“What are you thinking?” Jackson tested.

Janis looked at him, distantly, as if she were seeing him from across a canyon. “I was thinking about the time when you moved out,” she said. “You know, from the house on Grape Street.”

Jackson nodded. He remembered that day well.

“I was helping you pack, and mom was working out back with Jung-su.” Jackson made a face, and Janis continued. “I guess she was trying to stay out of your way, trying to keep out of sight. Anyway, you’d gone to the Gas ’n Snack down the road for something—cigarettes, maybe, and I was wrapping newspapers around some of your picture frames and putting them into a box.”
Janis paused, briefly, and then continued. “The picture frames had all been stacked on the floor,” she said, “and I remember when I picked up the last one, I noticed the back was loose and the picture was trying to slide out of the frame. I slid the cardboard out of the back because I was going to add some padding to it to make it fit tighter against the glass. Anyway, when I pulled everything apart, I found another picture, a smaller one, behind the main one.” Janis’s brows dipped inward. “It was a photograph of you and an Asian woman standing in front of some restaurant with your arms around each other. At the time, I was afraid to say something about it because it was hard to ask you anything back in those days. Later, though, when I was older and thought about it again—well, I guess I just didn’t know how to ask you about her. About the woman in that picture. I didn’t know if it had been taken before, or after, you met mom, and I think I was afraid to find out that it had been after.”

Jackson said nothing, waiting for her to finish.

“Was that woman—” she hesitated, looking at Peterson and then back at Jackson. “Was she this ‘Hoa?””

Jackson inclined his head a fraction, but he remained silent.

“You married this woman here in the U.S.? Before you met mom?”

“No.”

“In Vietnam?”

“Yes.”

Janis squinted. “Why didn’t you ever tell us? Or tell me? Don’t you think it was kind of an important piece of information? Something your family should know about you?”

Jackson shrugged. “What do you want me to say?” he said, noncommittally. “It was in the past. Long before I met your mom. It was irrelevant.”
“It’s not irrelevant to me,” Janis insisted. “I mean, this woman obviously impacted your life. Who knows? She might even be a big part of the reason you and mom had such a difficult time trying to make things work. I mean, who is she? Where is she? Is she still in Vietnam? Did you leave her behind when the war was over?”

Jackson blanched at this last question. In a way, he supposed that he had left Hoa behind. Unburied, and her whereabouts unknown, he’d felt as though he’d abandoned her. And without a body, there wasn’t even proof that she was dead. She could still be alive, for all he knew.

“She died,” he said, flatly. Better to nip that hopeful notion in the bud, right away.

“How?” Janis pressed.

“She was reported killed in the tunnels below the Cu Chi District in Saigon,” Jackson said. “But no one was allowed to go in to find her body. It was far too dangerous, and really, it would have been nearly impossible since the VC—”

Jackson’s voice broke. He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Wow,” Janis said, inanely.

“Yeah,” was all Jackson could say.

They were all quiet for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. The Petersons looked at each other and Bob Peterson grasped his wife’s hand and squeezed it.

“I’d like to hear more about her, someday,” Janis said. “I can see that she meant a lot to you.”

Jackson looked at her, his face pinched. Finally, he nodded. “Someday,” he said.

Janis’s face fell.

Jackson knew what she was thinking: that when he said “someday,” he really meant “never.” And that was just fine with him. There were just some things that couldn’t be said out
Janis suddenly straightened, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping. She looked at Jackson, her eyes narrowing, and then she leapt to her feet, one hand on her hip and the fingers of the other tapping her chin.

“Where did I put it?” She looked around the room as if that would help her remember. Finally, she went to the nightstand situated beside the bed, next to Peterson, and pulled out the little drawer, nearly toppling over a faux-Tiffany lamp perched on its surface. After steadying the glass shade, her fingers filtered through the contents of the drawer, for a moment—Jackson and the Petersons looking on, perplexed—before she slid it shut in exasperation.

“What are you looking for?” Jackson said.

Janis didn’t answer. Instead, she moved to the closet and opened the top drawer of an old battered filing cabinet that Jackson had given her when she was ten. He remembered she used to keep mostly old letters and Christmas cards in there, for as long as he could remember. Janis was a romantic when it came to correspondence, and he didn’t think she had ever thrown a single note away.

She rummaged through the drawer in a frenzy, displacing the neatly-stacked envelopes and loose, folded letters inside, and she grew increasingly agitated—slamming the drawer shut when she failed to find whatever it was she was looking for there. Tugging at the cabinet’s dented lower drawer, she finally coaxed the thing open with a stiff yank, eliciting a cringe-inducing whine of metal on metal when she pulled it all the way out. After only a few short seconds of more frantic digging, she sighed and lifted out what appeared to be a small envelope, crumpled into a tight ball.

“There you are,” she said, smoothing it out flat against her belly.
She looked hard at Jackson, and he looked back at her—his brow arching.

She turned to the Petersons. Their faces looked as if they were waiting for her to open a Christmas gift, and Mrs. Peterson nodded with a tentative, but curious, half-smile. Janis sat back down onto the beanbag chair and opened the envelope.

“Dear Mr. Taylor,” she read aloud, glancing up at Jackson and then back down again.

Jackson’s brows lowered, and he crossed his arms, waiting for her to continue.

“Dear Mr. Taylor,” Janis repeated. “My name is Bao. I’m fifteen years old and I live in San Diego, but I was born in Saigon—”

Jackson started, his back straightening away from the wall he’d been leaning against.

Janis continued. “I have been looking for you for three years, ever since I found your picture in an old trunk in our attic. Your name was written on the back. I think you are my father.”

Jackson drew a sharp breath, and Janis looked up at him.

“Where did you—how did—*when* did you get that!” he stammered, and snatched the letter from her hand.

“It’s addressed to the house on Grape Street,” Janis said. “Mom must have intercepted it before you could see it. And she must have read it and tossed it, because I only found it in the trash, accidentally, when I was doing my chores.” She smirked at Jackson. “And then I read it, myself, of course.”

Jackson was floored.

Janis frowned. “At the time, I thought maybe you’d had an affair, and that this kid was the result of that. I remember being so pissed that I threw it back in the trash.”

“But it’s—”
“Yes, I know. It’s still here. I guess I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of it, after all. I didn’t have the nerve to ask mom about it, or to confront you about it, so I just stuffed it in the back of my filing cabinet. And eventually, I forgot about it.”

Jackson read the remainder of the letter to himself. There was no mention of Hoa. The hastily-scratched lines only bore pronouns like “we” and “our,” and the writing only filled up half of a single page, telling him almost nothing, and hardly identifying the boy as the same child swimming around in Hoa’s womb the day she disappeared. Yet, the words had set into motion a feeling in Jackson that he had destroyed years ago—detonated into oblivion.

Hope.

The implications of the missive hit him square in the chest, and a million questions rattled around Jackson’s brain, and an equal amount of vying emotions rolled across his features when he read and re-read the letter.

“Do you think—” Peterson started.

“I don’t know.”

The full import of the unspoken question—the one everyone in the room was thinking—descended on him like a grenade: was Hoa actually alive?

Chapter 13

According to the postmark, the letter had been written almost fifteen years ago.

Jackson was suddenly furious. All those years Lori had known about the letter and had never said a word. Certainly there was the possibility that the kid—Bao—had written to the wrong guy. There were a lot of ex-soldiers out there who had kids they didn’t know about, or wives they had given up for dead. But, there was an equal possibility that Bao was his son and
that Hoa—

“Daddy,” Janis said, dragging Jackson back from the irresolution of his tumultuous thoughts. Her eyes were closed and she was rubbing at one of them as if she were reaching the end of a very long rope.

Jackson looked at her, his expression softening, and he pressed his hand against her knee.

“I realize there’s a lot I don’t know about you—about your past,” she continued, ignoring his hand. “And, clearly, there’s a lot that we need to talk about. But, I need to know—why the hell are we here?” She opened her eyes and gestured around the room, and then at the Petersons.

“Why are we doing it like this? With hostages, and freaking Kojak outside the trailer, and a dead guy in your living room, for chrissakes.” Jackson blanched, and Janis gave him a hard look.

“Why did you kidnap the Petersons, Daddy?” Janis asked, in almost a whisper.

Someone had finally asked the question out loud.

Wide-eyed, and with an anxious intake of breath, Peterson looked at his wife, and then at Janis, and then finally at Jackson. He was trembling.

“I don’t know,” Jackson said. “I was having a really bad day. Nightmares the night before, and flashbacks all morning. My truck’s busted, and I’m walking around this goddamn trailer and it feels like a sauna because the swamp cooler stopped working a week ago and it’s nearly a hundred-and-ten degrees outside.” The words were gushing out of him in a flood—undammed and barely coherent. “And my prosthetic hurts because I’m sweating and it’s making blisters right there where it sits up against my knee.” Jackson tapped at the offending member with the barrel of the Glock. “So, I go out in the heat and I walk to the liquor store to buy some beer, just so I can cool myself down a little. And when I get back, the phone’s ringing, and it’s the bank, and they tell me they’re going to foreclose on my fucking trailer and that I’ll need to
‘vacate the premises.’” Jackson swiped at a bead of sweat inching down his forehead. “My accounts are overdrawn, my refrigerator doesn’t have anything in it but a bucket of fried fucking chicken. And the little shit who interviewed me for a job, two days ago, called me just as I hung up with the bank, and he tells me thank you for applying but he won’t be needing my services at this time.” Jackson looked up at the Petersons. “And then, just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, Bob and Sheila Peterson, here, are knocking on my door and asking me to donate to their church fund because they’re trying to build a gym. And I kept asking myself, why in the hell does a church need a gym when there’s people out there in the streets without even a penny to their name and no food to eat? And then—something just snapped in me.”

Jackson looked away from the Petersons and down at the Glock dangling from his hand. “I wasn’t ever going to kill you. I only shot you because you were lunging at me after I shot that cop. And, as for the cop, I had to kill him because he was going to kill me.”

“What were you hoping to accomplish with them in here?” Janis said.

“I just—” Jackson threw up his hands. “I just wanted someone to hear me, for once. To listen and really hear. No one listens, anymore. People in their twenties, their thirties—they don’t care about me. About us. About the war. And kids, today. They know nothing about what American soldiers went through for them. Not just in Vietnam, but in the World Wars and in Korea, too. And the Gulf War. They have no idea, and they don’t really seem to care that they don’t know.”

Jackson supposed it seemed too long ago for kids to give a rat’s ass about most of those wars, but the guys that fought in them—those same guys that the kids had forgotten and didn’t appreciate—it wasn’t like they were dead and out of sight. They were still alive. And some of them were even the kids’ own parents, or grandparents, or uncles. They were alive and giving the
little bastards presents at Christmas and on their birthdays, and not once did the kids ask them about their time in country, and what they’d thought and felt about it. And not once did they just say, “thanks, Grandpa.” Instead, they took them for granted, and if anyone tried to call those kids on it, they didn’t want to hear it. They’d say they didn’t want to hear it, and that they could care less.

Jackson was rambling, again. And teetering up on a soapbox he knew Janis despised. But, it had all been bottled up for a long time, and it had come rushing out in a huge wave of emotion.

“I’m sorry, Peterson,” he said.

Peterson looked at him, astonished.

Jackson made a face. “I know. It seems kind of a feeble thing to say after all of this,” he said, sweeping the Glock in an arc to encompass the chaos of his trailer. “But, I don’t know what else to say. You were just in the wrong place at a very bad time. Although, I do have to tell you that I still have trouble with the collection you’re taking up for your church, man. I mean, aren’t their better causes to collect for?”

Peterson’s brow arched. “They’re building the gym so that financially-challenged kids can come play there after school and stay out of the streets. It’s really an inner-city project.”

Jackson shook his head. “You could have said that in the first place,” he said. “You might have saved yourself hours of listening to me yammer on—”

Jackson’s voice trailed off, suddenly, and his head whirled toward the living room.

“Daddy?”

Jackson put a finger to his lips and scrambled to his feet. Pointing the Glock back down the hallway, he edged around the corner of Janis’s old room and peered into the living room. Nothing stirred. He took three faltering steps down the corridor, and then he glanced up at the
skylight.

He saw the SWAT officer just before he felt the bullet enter his chest, and he suddenly found himself pitched backward. He clutched at the wall on his way down, pulling the window curtains on top of him when he crashed to the floor. Screams reverberated off the walls and into his brain, and there was a sudden commotion from the roof and at the front door. Then there were voices clamoring all about his head, and he thought he recognized Janis’s among them. He must have fallen asleep, he thought, inanely. And he tasted pennies: a slow oral infusion that began with a few cents worth of copper filigree, and then developed into a veritable bank of Lincolns, pulsing to the ragged rhythm throbbing in his chest. He could hear the blood pumping through his veins, and everything became hazy and disjointed. Noises were at once echoing all around him and yet oddly muffled, like whale song in the Pacific.

And then everything was clear, for a moment. Janis was holding his hand and he was on a stretcher being loaded into the back of an ambulance amid bright flashes of oscillating blue and red.

“They shot me,” Jackson said.

She nodded, tears shining in her eyes. “Yeah,” she said, and brushed her hand along the side of his face. “I guess they got you through the skylight.”

“Damn,” he said. His voice sounded a little drunk to his ears. “Gunned down by the local SWAT. I can’t believe they went up there again, and I missed it. That one’ll make Tripp laugh. All that shit going down in Nam and I survive it all just to get killed in my own damn home. How—what is it you always say? How pedestrian.” His head rolled back and forth on the stretcher. “I never should have put a stupid skylight in that fucking trailer.”

“You’re going to be fine, Daddy,” Janis said. But, her voice trembled a little.
Jackson took the steps two at a time and rang the bell. While he waited for an answer, he
turned and gazed out into the sunshine of a crisp, blue day. It was spring and the trees were
budding and a meadow lark warbled from a fencepost at the front gate. Jackson breathed in the
freshness of the air, and he gazed at the mountains rising up in a purple surge against the western
sky. He smiled.

The door opened behind him.

“Jax! You piece of shit. Where’ve you been, man?” Jaguar’s voice echoed off the vaulted
ceilings of the enormous foyer behind him.

“Jag, you son of a bitch. It’s good to see you.” Jackson grinned, and he clasped his friend
in a bear hug and clapped him soundly on the back.

“Everybody’s in the parlor.” Jaguar gestured into the house. “Come on in.”

They had all come.

Thumper was there, beaming when he introduced the supermodel eye-candy draped over
his arm. He winked at Jackson and held up a glass of champagne in a mock toast, and the
supermodel pursed her lips at him in a Marilyn Monroe air-kiss. That was Thumper—he’d
always been talking about all his pretty girls back home. Guess he’d been telling the truth.

Bobcat was there, too, and he saluted Jackson with the beer he held in one hand, and took
a drag from a joint in the other. His wife fed him a piece of wedding cake, and he laughed and
licked the icing off her fingers. And then, he kissed her. Catching Jackson out of the corner of his
eye, he pulled away from her and grinned, his buck-toothed mouth all smeared with a shade of
lipstick roughly the same hue of orange as his hair.

Jackson drifted further into the room, nodding at more G.I.s he used to know. And then
he saw Dillinger. He was admiring Jaguar’s vintage dart board, and then he looked up when Jackson approached. He smiled, and then he turned back to the board and traced his fingers along the embedded metal, bordering each section of the cork face.

Jackson shrugged and looked away. There was Tripp, wrestling on the floor with someone’s teenage kid, and when he looked up to acknowledge Jackson, the kid swept Tripp’s leg and pinned him—making everyone roar with laughter.

Someone handed Jackson a champagne flute, and the clink of a spoon tapping against a shallow champagne glass resounded through the room until the din subsided, and all was quiet. Jaguar pushed back his glasses and a broad smile stole across his face.

“Welcome back, everybody,” he said.

The parlor thundered in response, and everyone held their glasses up in a toast.

Jackson had forgotten how young Jaguar looked with his blonde cow-licked hair, crooked teeth, and glasses. Even though the thickness of the lenses resembled that of Norad doors, he looked like a kid of no more than twelve. Time was certainly kind to some people, Jackson thought.

Jaguar put an arm around Betty, his wife. “We are gathered here, today,” he began, and laughter bubbled through the guests. “Seriously,” he continued in a more sober tone. “I just want to toast the newlyweds. Bobcat, I just want you to know how much I appreciate what you did for all of us, in country. We will never forget your selflessness and your bravery there. But I, for one, think that Christy is way too good for you, and I sure hope you treat her right and keep her around for awhile because she makes a hell of a queso dip at football parties!”

Jackson grinned. He’d missed Jaguar’s humor. Sometimes it was all that had kept them going in Nam.
“Here’s to you, and to Christy,” Jaguar concluded. “And I propose a toast to fire. Not the kind that burns down shacks and shanties, but the kind that burns down pants and panties!”

Another roar of laughter.

“And,” he continued, “may you make the time to make lots of love and make lots of babies, and may you invite your friends over for beers on numerous occasions. Congratulations, you two.”

Jaguar and his guests extended their glasses in a group toast. “Hear, hear,” they said, in unison, and tipped their glasses back. All at once, everyone froze, and Jackson heard the familiar thwok-thwok-thwok of a helicopter hovering outside, and the rapid-fire of machine guns popping through the house. He scanned the crowd and his eyes fell on Tripp who looked back at him with widened, pleading eyes. Tripp still held the champagne flute to his lips, as if he’d been suspended in time, and suddenly it splintered into a thousand shards that blasted into his face, lacerating the tender flesh there into long peeling strips, until it all hung in tattered pieces from his skull. Jackson watched all of the guests’ faces disintegrate behind glasses of champagne, one by one: Tripp, Jaguar and his wife, Bobcat and his new bride, Thumper and his eye-candy, and Dillinger along with numerous children milling about. Their bodies bucked and danced with the impact of M67 rounds from an AK-47 strafing the room. Bodies fell and the bullets kept coming, pockmarking the walls and shattering the glass pane of an old grandfather clock. Chimes resounded deep in the clock’s body when rounds plinked against the hollow tubes, and then there was a loud clamor when the whole thing toppled over, crushing a bleeding and screaming Dillinger beneath it. A spurious arrangement of holes appeared in the antique dart board he’d been looking at and it fell off the wall and onto the floor, splitting into two sagging pieces. Glass, wood, and other debris were scattered everywhere, and Jackson’s hand flew to his ears, trying to
shut out the dissonance, and he closed his eyes.

“No! No! No!” he screeched.

“Daddy. Wake up. You’re dreaming.”

No. It hadn’t been a dream, this time. Jackson was sure of that. He could smell the blood—thick and acrid in the air—and the bitter residue of champagne still lingered in the back of his throat.

Someone was shaking his shoulders.

Jackson’s eyes fluttered open. Janis leaned in. Her features were blurry, but slowly they began to coalesce into the semblance of a face.

“What—where am I?” Jackson tried to sit up.

Janis gently pushed him back into the pillow. “You’re in the ICU.”

Jackson couldn’t breathe properly and there was a piercing ache in his chest. The bullet must have punctured a lung, he thought.

Janis dabbed at his forehead with a damp cloth. “Don’t move, Daddy. The doctor said you should stay still.”

“I just want you to know that I love you, sugar,” Jackson said.

“I know, Daddy,” Janis replied. “Just rest.”

“Janis—” Jackson croaked. “I also want you to know that I tried. I tried to choose to get better, to get past it, like you said. It just—it just didn’t work.”

“Don’t worry about that, now, Daddy. You just need to focus on healing.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen, sweetheart.”

“Shhh, of course it is,” Janis insisted. “Don’t talk like that. In fact, don’t talk at all, right
now. You need to keep still and rest,” she said, again.

“There are just a few things I have to say, and then I’ll be quiet,” Jackson promised. “I want you to go into my office, in the trailer. There’s another small trunk stashed way back in the closet. The key to it is in the gun safe, and the code to that is JanTay1975. Not very clever, is it?”

Janis shook her head, swiping at a couple of tears rolling down her cheek.

“Inside that trunk,” Jackson continued, “you’ll find everything you need to know about me, and Vietnam, and—” He hesitated, closed his eyes, and then opened them and looked at her. “And Hoa. There are more pictures, and there are private journals, letters, and newspaper clippings, things like that. You can look through all of it, and you can do what you want with it. I won’t need it anymore. Just do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

Jackson blinked and swallowed. “Just don’t forget me,” he pleaded. “And don’t forget the stories about Jag, and Tripp, and the others. Someone needs to remember them, too. And pass it along to other people. Please don’t let what happened go unnoticed and unremembered, anymore. It can’t all be just another blip in a censored history book. It’s too important.”

Jackson coughed, and then he squeezed his eyes shut when a jagged, burning sensation surged through his chest. A narrow trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth, and he heard Janis yelling for the nurse. His pulse quickened, his heart yammered in his chest, and his mind drifted somewhere else.

Hoa held out her hand and Jackson laced his fingers between hers, smiling when a light breeze lifted the hair from her shoulders and, for a brief moment, exposed the profile of her exquisite features. As always, she was breathtaking, and he marveled at the timelessness she had
about her. There were streaks of gray amid the ebony strands, now, and several tiny lines etched the outer corners of her eyes and mouth when her face stretched into a deep smile. But there the changes ended. A natural warmth still reached the depths of her eyes when, at last, she turned her head and looked at him. He could stand there forever, he thought, holding her hand, looking at her, waiting for the tide to change and the ocean waves to lap up over their naked toes. Stand there forever, and let the world do what it might all around them. He hadn’t a care in the world, outside that moment.

The sun hovered just inches above the water, and they stood there, together, hand-in-hand, and watched it dip lower, and then lower still, until it touched the ocean’s rippling surface.

“I have missed you,” she said.