

# **Stone - M.I.A. Hunter**

**M.I.A. Hunter, #1**

**by Stephen Mertz, 1947-**

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# **PART I**

## **Back from the Dead.**

### **Chapter 1**

Mark Stone blinked away sweat as he stared down at the small convoy. Three ex-U.S. six-by-six trucks and two cannibalized jeeps wound up the twisting trail of the steaming Laotian jungle. Stone checked his watch. There were forty-five seconds left before they launched the attack.

Gripping the CAR-15 automatic rifle, Stone checked the far side of the road where Tran Hoi and half of his ragtag band of anti-communist guerillas lay waiting with Terrance Loughlin.

The mountain road was one truck wide and passed directly below Stone at a range of thirty yards. They had to pick their targets carefully on this M.I.A. rescue mission. A small tree had been felled so it would cover half the road but not block it. The rigs would have to slow to a crawl to pass it.

Stone picked up a small red box the size of a deck of cards and pushed a toggle switch on the bottom, then looked at the black button. Twenty seconds more.

Along the small ridge parallel to the road, Stone saw ten of his Laotian freedom fighters in prone firing positions behind the best cover they could find. Hog Wiley was hidden some thirty yards south where he had a shoulder firing LAW he would use on the trailing jeep to seal off the end of the column.

The jungle seemed to close in around them. A heavy, continual, drenching mist fell from a silent fog. Stone and the rest of the eighteen men were soaked through, and had been for two days. It was the monsoon season in southwest Laos.

The first government jeep rounded the corner of the road fifty yards away, snarling and skidding as it came up the small rise. There were two men in the jeep, one with an AK-47, the classic Russian automatic rifle. He carried it upright, ready to shoot. The Vietnamese regular knew what he was doing. His head turned, eyes probing the dense jungle at the edge of the road.

Behind the jeep, the six-by-six trucks would contain slave labor, heading for the worst work in the occupied nation—the Vietnamese attempt to activate some old gold and silver mines. Stone's intelligence reports had proved to him that there would be from two to six American M.I.A.s in the mix of slave prisoners being moved from one mine to another.

That's why the attack had been planned down to the last detail, with each rifleman assigned to specific targets. There could be no indiscriminate firing that might injure the lost P.O.W.s.

Stone tensed as the third covered army truck wheeled around the corner. He was amazed that the sturdy U.S.-made workhorses were still running. Most were

over twenty years old by now, perhaps more. It was obvious that they had been battered and used, repaired and cannibalized. But they were running. The jeep at the end of the convoy appeared. There were two men on board, but no Western faces.

Stone watched the lead jeep now, as the driver approached the downed tree. It was a common occurrence along these roads. The driver slowed and Stone's eyes closed to slits. He timed the jeep, and watched closely as it came to the exact spot on the roadway beside the top of the felled tree.

His hand tightened on the red box, his finger on the black button, sweating. Then he pressed hard.

The jeep lifted three feet off the sodden roadway from the blast of C-5 plastic explosive planted under it. The rig kicked over on its side, then rolled a dozen feet down the road and exploded in an orange burst of flame.

At the rear of the short convoy, the jeep driver heard the explosion ahead and looked up just in time to sense danger and open his mouth to scream.

Hog Wiley snorted as he followed the trailing jeep in his LAW sights.

The Light Artillery Weapon sighed, and its small rocket leaped away from the launcher, trailing a tail of fire and smoke as it darted forward.

Before reaching full velocity, the warhead plowed into the screaming driver's chest and slammed him against the front seat hard enough to trigger the fuse. Instantly the jeep shattered into a dozen pieces. As the LAW detonated, the gas tank exploded almost in the same moment.

The drivers of the three remaining trucks were caught in the middle and couldn't move away from the attack in either direction.

For a moment, the sound of the explosions trailed off into the sullen, damp jungle growth. Then a man screamed.

"What the fuck is happening?" a distinctive American voice shouted, and a blond-haired G.I. jumped out of the lead truck. He had a scraggly beard, was bare chested and wore Vietnamese army pants, cut off halfway to the knee. The man was tall, once sturdily built but now dangerously thin. His eyes blazed as he looked at the burning jeeps.

Stone waited. Usually there would be no guards inside the trucks, only at the front and rear and in the cabs. But Stone had cautioned his men to be sure they had a Vietnamese or Laotian target before they fired.

Before he could yell at the American to hit the dirt, twin machine guns in the middle truck opened up, firing through the canvas tops, spraying the steaming jungle on both sides of the narrow road.

But Stone could not fire. There might be more Americans in the middle truck, with the machinegunners.

Across the road Stone heard a single shot fired and then a scream from the lead truck. Someone on the side of the road with Terrance Loughlin must have found a clear target.

The machine gun chattered again and a dozen Vietnamese regular troopers piled out of the middle truck and stormed forward a dozen feet into the jungle.

Stone's CAR-15 stuttered, and six more of his Laotian anti-communist guerillas blasted at the Viets, but half of them got into the jungle untouched.

“Get the bastards!” the blond American screamed. He was jumping up and down beside the first truck. A guard rushed out of the cab of the first truck, his AK-47 ready for a butt stroke to silence the American. A pair of stingers from a 15 stopped the plan as the rounds bored their way through the Vietnamese’s chest and exploded out his back, taking two bloody vertebrae with them.

The American grabbed the Russian rifle and charged into the brush, unscathed.

Stone’s CAR snarled again as he saw three more Vietnamese soldiers jolt from the front truck and rush to the far side of the road. He nailed one of them, but two others somehow got through the hailstorm of hot lead.

The machine guns inside the truck blasted again. This time Stone knew he could wait no longer. He pushed in a fresh clip and emptied it into the center of the truck, then grabbed another magazine and emptied it in short bursts a little higher through the canvas. The machine gun cut off firing in mid-burst.

They were only twenty seconds into the fight, but already it was turning sour for Stone. There were five times as many guards as he had expected. He saw movement in the cab of the first truck and watched as three bursts slammed into the cab.

Directly in front of him and only ten yards away, a green-clad Vietnam regular materialized out of the green of the jungle and threw a grenade. Stone’s CAR-15 burped twice, sending five rounds at the man each time. The second salvo caught him in a line from his crotch to his chest, and the Viet jerked backward in a shower of blood.

Stone buried his head in the wet jungle floor. The grenade detonated in a sudden, jolting burst. It had hit a branch and dropped almost in the thrower’s lap.

Stone looked down his line. Three or more guards must have erupted from the last big truck. And his own men were handicapped in the fight, since they could not be certain where the Americans and other slaves were. Each Laotian freedom fighter had been given explicit orders not to endanger the lives of any of the prisoners.

Suddenly a blast of gunfire came from across the road. Stone pointed to two of the Laotians and signaled for them to follow him. He moved slowly down the gentle slope, through a heavy stand of three-inch-thick bamboo. Then he motioned the rest of the line to advance.

Hog Wiley looked back at the last of the six-by-six trucks. As he concentrated on the rig, a lone uniformed trooper jumped over the tailgate.

His burst of six rounds knocked the Vietnamese soldier to the ground. The hot lead hornets snarled from chest to chin and the trooper sprawled in quick death beneath the truck.

Hog grunted and his dark, deadly eyes flickered over the rest of the trucks. He caught the hand sign of the Lao nearest him and moved down the slope and rammed a fresh magazine into his CAR-15. He charged through the bamboo and flattened against a towering teak tree. And then, he waited.

A moment later a Viet soldier came into view, pulling the pin from a grenade. As soon as the Viet had the pin free, Hog put a single shot through his left eye. Four seconds later the grenade exploded in the soldier’s hand.

Hog grunted. At least that was one slant who wouldn’t have to “go batshit” as the troops called it. The Army brass used to call it shell shock or battle fatigue.

Then the psychiatrists in Nam said it was “acute environmental reaction.” Hog liked the grunt’s version better, so much more colorful and descriptive.

Ahead, he saw the slippery, wet bamboo leaves move. A moment later he spotted a bare arm, then a bare chest. *What the hell?* Hog wondered. He swore there was blond hair on the chest. A second later a blond head pushed past a bamboo tree and stared toward the big teak.

Hog grinned. The face was as American as apple pie and the Fourth of July. The American stared around and frowned.

“Chrissakes, everybody Boo Coo Dinky Dau around here? Any Americans out there?” He said the words out loud, but softly so he wouldn’t make himself a target. Still a pair of shots slammed past him from the road.

“Over here, Grunt!” Hog whispered, and leaned around the tree. The grin on the American’s face was worth the trip for Hog. First, the big square face smiled, then he was crying. He crawled on his hands and knees toward Hog, dragging the AK-47.

When he got to Hog he threw his arms around the burly Texan and blubbered, then sat back, and shook his head.

“Christ, I never thought I’d see another damn Yankee face again! Where the hell’d you come from?”

“Thailand, and that’s where you’re going. Just as soon as we clean up here. How many more Americans down there?”

For a moment, the P.O.W. couldn’t answer. He sat there on the oozing, soupy jungle floor wiping tears out of his eyes. He shivered and shook his head. Then he held out his hand.

“Anderson, Farley.” He shivered, then gripped Hog’s big paw so hard Hog winced.

“Hog Wiley, Anderson. Damn glad to meet you. Now get your ass down and use that ’47. How many more GI’s down there?”

“Goddamn!” the blond man gasped. “You really came to rescue us. Damn, never thought it would happen! Oh, *damn!*”

Hog looked back at his sector and saw two more Viets moving up the slope. He nailed one with a burst of six rounds from the heavier AK-47 and saw the second man slip to the left.

Anderson saw him too. He motioned to Hog’s fighting knife on his hip. Hog pulled it out and gave it to Anderson.

“This little bastard is mine!” Anderson said with such intensity that Hog knew there wasn’t a chance of stopping him. He offered Anderson the ’47, but the big American shook his head.

“That would be too damn fast!” He slid away from Hog in the same direction the Vietnamese soldier had been heading. Hog looked back at the still-burning jeep and the three trucks, then moved forward up the hill.

He hand-signaled the Laotians to merge in that direction as well. He worried about Anderson, but there wasn’t a chance the man would let him help. Anderson wanted one close kill for himself, something to even the score for the thirteen years he had been rotting in a slave labor camp.

Flat on his belly, Anderson wormed his way through the mud and slime of the jungle floor. He passed a thicket of closely-grown bamboo completely walled off by

rattan vines. A good place to hide. He stopped, not moving. His old combat training returned and he checked the area, waiting, listening.

Quickly he heard a dozen small jungle creatures stirring, moving. Then a new sound came. It was the scrape of metal on metal.

Anderson waited. The suck of a boot coming out of liquid mud followed, then a muffled sneeze. Anderson moved slowly, worming his way around the edge of the rattan-masked bamboo to a thick hardwood tree. He slowly lifted himself up, making sure his left knee didn't give out on him. As he peered around the tree, he saw the noisy Viet, flat on his stomach, working away from the battle.

Anderson took four barefooted strides forward and kicked the soldier in the side of the head with his heel—the way he had learned to do for self-defense. If he had worn boots he would have stomped the man to death.

In a second, Anderson had dropped his hundred-and-forty-pound frame on top of the wiry Vietnamese. The American's hand clamped over the Oriental mouth and nose. Then, bending forward, Anderson stared into the man's eyes. There was fear there. Fear that turned to terror when Anderson brought up the big knife and slit the man's throat from ear to ear.

Without a second look, Anderson moved through the dripping jungle. Thirty yards up the hill he found Hog Wiley.

Anderson tapped Wiley on the shoulder and the six-foot-four Texan turned in total surprise. Hog was a bear of a man, not only tall, but thick and heavy as well.

"Down!" Hog commanded. Anderson dropped, took the AK-47 from Hog, and checked to see where the safety was.

"Ready to go?" Hog asked.

"Four more Americans down there," Anderson blurted. "Two of 'em are sick."

"We'll get them."

"I'll help!"

"You already have. Now your job is to stay alive."

"Knew a nugget once who always used to tell me that."

"Nugget?" Hog chuckled. "Ain't heard that in years. A damn ensign. We called them brown bars, second lieutenants. You knowing nuggets must make you Navy. You a pilot?"

"Was before I caught too much ground fire. What the hell year is this?"

"You won't believe it." Hog told him.

"Don't bullshit me."

"True. Now keep your head down and stay here until we wrap this up."

On the far side of the road, the English merc Terrance Loughlin, found the going tougher. Not even his S.A.S. commando training could help him here. He had three enemy soldiers with lots of ammo trapped behind a log barricade, but no men to flank them.

Three Laotians near him were keeping a trio of enemy busy with occasional bursts of hot lead. Loughlin looked over all the possibilities, then studied a large hornet nest suspended six feet over the spot where the Vietnamese regulars held out. The Englishman grinned and lifted his CAR-15 on single shot.

He put five carefully placed rounds into the bottom of the paper-thin nest. It was eighteen inches across and about that deep.

“Come on you little bastards, do your work,” Loughlin said. He watched the nest and soon saw a response. Dozens of angry hornets buzzed around the nest in a heated frenzy. A few seconds later, half the swarm dived in attack on the three Vietnamese below.

Screams echoed through the jungle for a moment, then one of the regulars lifted up, slapping at his face as he ran toward the road. A burst of hot lead ended his protests about the hornets.

The second man tried to crawl away, but Loughlin spotted him and put him out of his misery. The third Vietnamese screeched out a surrender. He stood waving his arms, slapping at the winged attackers.

One of the Laotians laughed and fired a ten-round burst into him.

Within five minutes, Loughlin had swept the rest of his sector, counted the bodies, and given an all-clear whistle to Stone.

They met at the trucks and found one live guard who had been hiding. The Laotians shot him at once, then called to the prisoners to come out. There were thirty-five Laos and four Americans. None of them had been scratched in the exchanges.

When the Laotians and Thai prisoners understood that they were free, it took them only seconds to fade into the woods and head back to their home villages.

Anderson talked quietly with the four other Americans. One man couldn't walk. He would have to be carried. Stone watched Anderson with the men.

“You've been with these people for a while?”

“Four or five years. We started out with fifteen. Ten of us died or were killed by guards. I swore I wouldn't let any more of my men give up and die—or be worked to death. Looks like we've made it.”

“Commander Anderson, I'd guess we have a damned good chance now. But first we have about a hundred and twenty miles of Laotian territory to get through. We couldn't arrange any kind of a chopper pickup because we had no idea how long it would take to find you. Hope you don't mind a little hike.”

Anderson laughed, then turned away as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Stone had Loughlin, his “soup” man, put charges in each of the three trucks, then they all withdrew a quarter of a mile while Loughlin blew up the enemy rigs. By that time it was an hour till dark, and Stone asked his Laotians to find a safe camping spot for the night. They would move out with first light.

Anderson came up to Stone after they had settled into a densely overgrown spot of three-inch bamboo that had a rattan vine protective shield.

“You planning to move out at dawn?” Anderson asked.

“True, we've got a lot of clicks to do.”

“I can't go with you.”

Stone sat up and stared at him. “We came six thousand miles to find you. Why can't you leave?”

“I just... can't go. You tell me where you're headed, leave me a Lao and we'll catch up in two or three days. I'm sorry. It's got to be this way.”

Anderson turned around and walked back to the spot where the five M.I.A.s sat closely together around a small fire. None of them said a word.



## Chapter 2

Wiley scowled at Stone and took another stroke across the sharpening stone with a fighting knife that was already sharp enough to shave with.

“What the hell does he mean, he can’t leave with us in the morning?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll find out.” Stone stared at the group of M.I.A.s clustered around their small fire. “They’ve been through hell together, and that makes for a damn strong tie among them. Sometimes it takes some getting used to, to understand that you’re really free. Remember that ex-Marine we brought out? He never did understand he was a free man.”

Loughlin squatted beside his leader, and scrubbed one hand back through his red hair. “Anderson’ll feel different by sunrise. Count on it—even good things seem better in the morning.”

Stone finished cleaning the CAR-15 and assembled it, pushing in a full magazine. “I’m going to have a little talk with our Navy flyer.”

He had seen a variety of reactions by newly released M.I.A.s before, but nothing to equal this. He came up to the small fire slowly, making sure the men saw him coming and knew who he was. He motioned to Anderson, the Navy pilot eased to his feet. Neither man said a word until they were well away from the former M.I.A.s.

“Explain,” Stone said.

“Why I can’t go with you in the morning?”

Stone nodded.

“Jack Mason.”

“So?”

“He’s the one lying down back there.” In the dim light, Anderson turned to Stone. “Jack’s dying. We know it, he knows it. Those trucks were killing him faster with the jolting. He won’t last more than 24 hours. I won’t let him die when he’s tied on my back. He deserves better.”

Stone looked back at the small fire. “I can’t leave you here. We’ll make a litter and move Jack with us for two miles, then let everyone rest up for a day. We’ve been pushing hard and we’ve got three wounded.”

“Get some distance from the burned-out trucks?”

“Right.”

“Makes sense. I’ll explain it to Jack. He’ll appreciate it.” A far-off look came in Anderson’s eyes. “I’d guess that tricky Dick Nixon isn’t president anymore?”

“It has been a long time,” Stone grunted. “Ronald Reagan is president now, in his second term.”

“Reagan the movie actor? You’re kidding!” Anderson shook his head. “Looks like I’ve got a damned lot to catch up on.”

“And remember all those years of back pay you’ve got coming. And at least two promotions.”

“Oh, *damn!*” Anderson shook his head. “I won’t know any of the sports figures, the movie stars, and none of the politicians. Ronald Reagan is *president?*”

“You’ll enjoy catching up.”

"I sure will. Galloway is scared shitless already. Says he's sure his old lady is remarried. Worried about finding his kids. Just plain scared."

"Happens. Uncle Sam goes all out to make the transition as easy as possible. Tell Galloway a lot of guys have made it back into society. He'll do just fine. After what you guys have been through, civilian life or the peacetime service will be a piece of cake. I was a P.O.W. over here for a spell."

"No lie?"

"No lie. That's another big reason I want to get all of you out alive."

"All except Jack. I better get over there to him. I figure it might even be sometime tonight."

They walked back to the small camp silently, then parted. Stone checked his sentries, a trio of Laotians, and went to where Hog and Terrance were working on their weapons.

"Figure it out?" Loughlin asked.

"Yep. Jack Mason, one of the M.I.A.s, is dying. Tonight or tomorrow."

"So we pull back a few miles and wait?"

Stone nodded.

"Goddamn!" Wiley spat.

"Our timing was terrible," Loughlin said. He stood and turned away, shaking his head. "Where the bloody hell are those boots we brought? We had six pair spread out in packs. I'm going to find them and try to fit the guys."

Stone waved him on and Hog finished sharpening the small throwing knife from his boot before he stood.

"I want to meet this Jack Mason."

Ten minutes later Hog sat near the small fire telling stories about racing on the dirt tracks in Texas. Jack Mason laughed hardest of all. Every time he laughed he coughed, but he didn't seem to mind.

Mason was a short man, stooped from slave labor, and so thin he looked like he would crack if he so much as stepped off a curb. His face was gaunt, but his eyes burned with the intensity of a 106-degree fever. He slapped Hog on the back.

"Bet you drive in the demolition derbies," Mason said in his soft, whispery voice.

"Whipped around a few figure eight tracks, too," Hog conceded. "One time outside of Fort Worth I had this '74 Chevy. Course you back up all the time in the destruction so your radiator doesn't get clobbered."

"I was doing great, down to the last four when I got broadsided and then looked up to see the twins coming at me. These were identical twins from Houston who always drove Ford Fairlanes and protected each other. If they got down to be the last two, it was kill time!"

"One of them came at me from each end, front and back. I pretended to stall out, and then gunned away at the last second and they smashed into each other at about 20 mph, back bumper to back bumper, and put each other out of it."

"But when I got away I was a sitting duck for the other car—he smashed my radiator halfway back in my lap. I got second-place money."

"Always wanted to drive in one of those," Jack said. He looked up at Hog.

"Hell, look me up in Houston and I'll give you a ride. You can drive one of my cars."

“Deal!” Jack said. He reached out and shook hands with Hog. Then Jack coughed again and couldn’t stop. Anderson slid in beside him, lifted him into a sitting position and slapped him twice on the back. The coughing stopped. Jack remained in the sitting position with Anderson holding him. He looked at the other four M.I.A.s.

“Hell, who are we kidding. I’m dying, we all know that. It’ll be tonight sometime. You assholes got to march out of here tomorrow—get away from the slants.” His voice was whisper thin and so soft they had to lean forward.

“Promise me that you won’t let me hold you up. When you’re ready to saddle up, you move it. I’m checking out. No more problem than checking out of a Holiday Inn. I want all you cold motherfuckers to promise me you’ll *di di mau* out of here with first light. You got that, soldiers?”

“Yes sir!” Anderson said with a snap to his voice.

“Sir! Yes sir!” the three other men said, almost in unison.

“Christ but that feels good,” Jack said. “Just to hear that tone in a voice. Christ, but I loved the Army. Still think we did right hiding our rank.”

“Sir, I hear each of us gets two promotions,” Anderson said. “That makes you a brigadier general. You finally got your star, sir!”

“Waited long enough.” He smiled, then his face went slack and he leaned forward. Anderson caught him and he shook his head.

“I ever tell you men what it feels like to die?”

“No sir,” one said.

“Too late to start now, then.” He looked at each of them. “I’m getting short, you guys. Damn short. We’ve been in the hurt locker too damn long.”

“General, sir,” Anderson said. “Would the general like a beer?”

“Sure, and Raquel Welch, and a big hot bath...”

Anderson pulled a can of beer from behind him and popped the top and gave it to Jack. He couldn’t hold the can. Anderson lifted the can and the general drank a few swallows.

“Pass it around,” the whispered command came. Each of the men had a sip and it came back.

“Best command I ever had!” Mason said. “Thanks, everybody.” He looked at each one in turn, then sighed, and closed his eyes for the last time. A moment later he sagged against Anderson, who laid him down gently on the blanket.

Anderson bent, his ear to his commander’s chest. He rose slowly.

“He’s gone. The general just checked out.”

Hog edged away from the gathering. He was an outsider now. He watched as they had a short ceremony, then buried their leader in the only dry place they could find.

Loughlin rounded up the six pairs of boots, each from a Laotian pack, and took them to the freed Americans. None of them had shoes, only homemade sandals. The boots were purposely large so they could be worn with extra socks. The men quickly found the best fit they could and put on two pairs of dry socks under the boots. All four preferred to sleep in their new footgear.

The Laotians had buried two of their men. Two more had serious wounds and would remain in the area and try to find a friendly village where they might get

some medical attention. Hog had a gouge on his right arm but he paid no attention to it.

The next morning at 0530, they saddled up and moved out. Stone sandwiched the Laotians around the newly-freed men. Iran Hoi, the Laotian leader, had sent his men back to the convoy and picked up every weapon that worked. They had enough to give the four ex-M.I.A.s their choice of weapons. All of them took the AK-47 automatic rifles, and five or six extra magazines that held 30 rounds each. All seemed impatient to use the weapons, to get some revenge for their long nightmare.

They marched along narrow jungle trails all day. Tran Hoi kept his scouts well in advance of the main party, and their only contact with Vietnamese regular troops was handled expertly. The scouts picked up a five-man patrol visually, returned, and warned the main party so everyone had plenty of time to fade into the jungle and wait for the enemy troops to march past.

By noon, the M.I.A.s had completed only ten miles, and Stone was concerned. He figured they were still 110 miles from the border. When he got his M.I.A.s within twenty-five miles he could call in chopper support, but anything more than that was simply not possible.

"We have one hell of a long walk," Stone told Loughlin.

"It wouldn't seem so long if we stopped for tea time every afternoon," he said, then laughed. "Or if we had an autobahn to walk along."

Late in the afternoon they passed over a low range of hills, and found a wider trail with a few cart wheel marks angling into a three-mile-wide valley, then on to the west toward Thailand. They were just over the crest when they heard rifle fire a half-mile in front of them.

Tran Hoi sent two scouts forward to check, and one soon came running back with a bullet in his shoulder. Their forward point scouts had run into an ambush, and both had been killed. So had the third man. The Vietnamese had a fortified roadblock ahead.

Hog listened to Tran tell Stone the details.

"Hell, by now they'll know somebody is coming. They'll set up with every heavy piece they own."

"Obviously we have to go around them," Loughlin said as he checked his sidearm, a fully automatic 9mm Uzi assault pistol. The fifteen-round magazine was full, and he pushed it back in place.

"Hell, call in an air strike," Commander Anderson said.

"Wish to hell we could."

"We'll go around, but let's wait until dark," Stone said. "That way we'll have the advantage."

Hog cleaned his fingernails with his eleven-inch fighting knife and scowled.

"How much of a damn advantage? Make it worth the wait?"

"We won't know until we try it," Stone said. "We have two hours until dark. Let's get off the trail, put out security, and have a rest. We'll need it before the night's over."

A half hour later they were off the trail and flaked out in the driest places they could find in the soggy, monsoon-soaked land. Stone gestured to Tran Hoi, and they walked away into the denser jungle.

“Iran, I want two of your best men. They’ll have to sneak up on that roadblock, make a grenade attack, then lead the troops to the right, deeper into the valley. While they’re busy over that way, we can move through to the left of the roadblock.”

Tran squinted up at Stone. He was barely five feet tall, in his forties, and had been a soldier since he was ten. There wasn’t a weapon from any nation that he couldn’t use expertly. He had been wounded dozens of times, at one time been a full colonel, and now fought against the takeover of his homeland by the hated Vietnamese.

Slowly he nodded. “Yes. Good plan. I go, take one man. Leave Sergeant Dang in charge.” He bounced his head twice more, grunted and wheezed before he looked up. “Go hour after sundown. While sun still in their eye. We hit, run like hell. Find you to west, maybe not until daylight.”

Stone wasn’t sure he liked having Tran go. “You sure you should be one of the two men?”

“Best men go. Tran best.” He turned and walked back to his troops, the twelve remaining Laotian freedom fighters.

Stone had no doubts about the little man doing exactly what he said he would. Two hours after sunset they had to be ready to haul ass toward the roadblock, then circle around it and run like hell for the hills again, to the west.

Hog sat leaning against a big hardwood tree, where he could see most of the others. He leaned his head back against the smooth bark and took a deep breath. He was asleep and snoring in twenty seconds.

Cradled in his lap was the big .44 AutoMag, a remarkable weapon that was as close as you could get to the power of a rifle in a handgun. It had a .44-caliber revolver lead bullet mated to a cut-down 7.62 mm NATO rifle cartridge case.

The recoil operated pistol took a big guy able to fire and hold it steady for a second shot. It ripped out a 240-grain bullet at 1,640 feet per second at the muzzle, with an energy of 1,455 foot pounds. The bolt took six locking lugs to contain the explosive internal gas pressure when the weapon was fired.

Hog had become attached to the heavy handgun. He said he saved it for the “tough stuff.” A round from a .44 AutoMag would blast through sheet metal and the engine block of a modern car, usually killing the metal monster.

Stone couldn’t sleep. He paced through the small camp, served as lookout, and checked on the rescued M.I.A.s. They were quietly watchful. None of them were sleeping, either.

Anderson shook his head. “Christ, after fifteen years of sweating out this hellhole, I’m not about to get knocked off in my sleep this close to freedom. For me, I’m not really free until I hit good old stateside U.S.A.!”

“We’ll make it, Commander. One way or another. How are your people holding up?”

“So far, so good. Galloway is a little too tired. He’s the weakest of the four of us. But he’ll make it if I have to carry him the last fifty damn miles!”

“I like your style, Anderson. No wonder you lasted fifteen years in those cages.”

They moved out exactly two hours after sunset. The Laotian said the roadblock was a mile ahead. They went off the road after half a mile and worked through the

series of rice paddies and light brush. Ten minutes after they left the road, they heard the attack on the roadblock.

Three grenades went off almost at once, then automatic rifle fire shattered the remainder of the night quiet, and oriental voices screamed in death agony.

Stone and the lead scout doubled their pace then, moving quickly along the dark paddies, staying a quarter of a mile from the road.

Almost at once it was obvious that the battle had shifted to the left. Tran was leading away most of the roadblock defenders on a false trail.

Stone had screwed the efficient silencer on his Beretta 93R and now motioned for the scout to drop and stay motionless. Ahead he saw the outline of a sentry standing in the moon shadow of a tall paddy wall.

Moving like a ghost, Stone slid along the two-foot-wide solid footing between the marsh-like rice paddies. He paused twice, then knelt and held the Beretta with both hands. The weapon gurgled twice.

The guard turned, tried to lift his rifle, but already his commands were sluggish, and he pitched face first in the flooded paddy—one more down.

The Laotian rushed up, took two full magazines for the AK-47 from the corpse, and hurried on past. Stone waved his men forward and they ran along the dikes, as the firefight moved farther to the left and away from them.

Twenty minutes later, they were nearing the edge of the valley and found the road again. It was wider here. They marched at double-time as they swung down the narrow dirt road.

“Made it, by damn!” Anderson crowed. “What about those two Laotians? They get back yet?”

Stone shook his head. “I’m not going to worry about them until morning. They’ll have their hands full just trying to stay alive.”

An hour later, they were deep in the jungle again. The road narrowed as it wound into the hills, then nearly vanished. Stone realized it was angling almost southwest. He wished he had a better map. He wanted to wait for Tran Hoi but there was no time. As soon as that roadblock was hit back there, word must have gone out over the wire. There would be hundreds of furious troops swarming in here from every outpost in this section. They had to keep on moving.

Stone checked the M.I.A.s. Hog Wiley was carrying two packs the M.I.A.s had tried to shoulder. Anderson helped Galloway to keep up. They would have to take a break before long, whether Stone wanted to or not. The diminished strength and stamina of the M.I.A.s dictated the speed of their march.

Loughlin tramped back to Stone from his position on the point and shook his head.

“We have some rather large problems up front. Better come look. There’s a village straddling the road, and what look like big bonfires burning on both sides of the road. Either the village has been wiped out, or there’s some bloody huge celebrating going on up there. Either way, I don’t see how we’re going to get past them.”

Stone clenched his fists at his side. “Goddamn,” he growled. “I guess you, me, and Hog will have to clean it up ourselves.”

Loughlin stifled a laugh.

“You think I’m kidding?” Stone asked.

“No, old chum,” the Brit sighed. “I *know* you’re not kidding.”

## Chapter 3

Stone, Hog, and Loughlin moved up to the front of the column, picked out one Lao who could speak a little English to take with them, and crept up as close as they could to the roaring bonfires without being seen.

“Jesus H. Kee-rist!” Hog snarled. “Looks like a damn slaughterhouse!”

“Bloody bastards!” the Brit growled.

Stone stared at the scene in silence. Five naked men hung from the corner posts of the Laotian houses. All were stripped naked, all had been cut, slashed, and probably hacked with machetes, tortured terribly before they died.

Two naked women lay spread-eagled on their backs on blankets near the village communal house. Stone couldn’t tell if they were still alive or not.

For a moment, no one moved in the small village. Stone counted a dozen huts. Probably that many families made this their home. He motioned for the Laotian freedom fighter to move over beside him. The small man crawled on his hands and knees to a spot beside Stone. He wiped at tears in his eyes.

“Why?” Stone asked.

The small man frowned, not knowing the word. Stone pointed at the village, holding up both hands palms up.

The Lao understood. He held up one finger, stood, and ran forward, using the larger hardwood trees as cover. Then at the far side of the village, away from the fires, he slipped from jungle to village, and darted into a hut.

Three CAR-15 automatic rifles covered him as best as the Americans could. The Lao was basically on his own. He left the hut carrying something in his hand. Then Stone saw in a flash of light from the fire that it was a knife, freshly blooded.

A scream shattered the peace of the Laotian night. The small man charged from the second house into the jungle and vanished.

A civilian stumbled from the hut, one hand holding a long wound on his abdomen, the other hand a pistol. He screeched a dozen words, then fell forward, his finger triggering a shot as he jolted into the ground and lay there without moving.

A half-dozen men spilled from the various houses, some pulling on clothes, all with rifles and pistols. They ran to the dead man, stared around, and at once started to put out the fires.

Before they knew he was there, the Laotian freedom fighter knelt down beside the three Americans. He touched Stone and pointed at the men.

“Lao... communists... *bastards*.”

“They are the ones who slaughtered the village men?”

“They kill... *we* kill,” the Laotian hissed.

Stone had heard that communist troops had slaughtered a million of their people. And there were still scattered bands of the guerillas over most of Laos.

The small Laotian lay down and aimed his AK-47 at the six men still in the light of the fires. He looked up at Stone. “O.K.?”

"Figure we owe those bastards a thing or two!" Hog snarled. "Even up the fucking score a little!"

"Waste them," Stone directed. "On my command."

The four men spread out, settled down, and picked targets.

"Do it!" Stone barked sharply, and four rifles chattered. Five seconds later, the six communist killers lay twitching in their own blood.

Nobody else came out of the huts.

Stone looked at the Laotian. "Any more?"

The small oriental held up two fingers, touched his chest, then pointed at the village.

"I'll go with him," Hog grunted.

"No!" Stone hissed sharply. "There might be some local men in there. Could you tell the difference between them and the communists? I couldn't."

Hog belched, nodded and settled back down to keep the village under his gun if necessary.

The Laotian freedom fighter darted into the house nearest the jungle. A few moments later, he moved from the rear of that house to another. A short cry came there, then silence. They saw him run to the next hut, the largest. He rushed inside and his AK-47 blasted a dozen rounds.

He quickly checked the rest of the houses, then waved at where Stone and his team lay. The Americans ran into the village. The Laotian had untied the two young women from the blankets and hurried them into a hut.

Two other women dragged a man from one house. His throat had been slit. They dropped him on the pile of dead soldiers near the center of the village.

The small Laotian with Stone's team talked quietly with the women. One old man tottered from the large house. Two teenage boys ran in from the jungle where they had been hiding.

"Bring up the detail," Stone told Loughlin, who jogged off at once. Stone leaned against a hut and watched the natives of this troubled land. There was little else he could do. The killers had been avenged, but that would not bring back the six fathers who had been slaughtered.

The women brought out a basket of fruit. Stone accepted it with thanks.

Hog glared around the area. It was nearing midnight. "Damn, we better get our asses out of here and get some clicks between us and the slants back at that outpost."

When Terrance arrived with the rest of the Laotians and the four M.I.A.s, he steered them around the far side of the village, away from the slaughter. Hog and Stone had already cut down the corpses of the six dead Laotian men, and their families had taken away the bodies.

"Thank them for the fruit," Stone told the Lao who had done most of the tough work. The small man smiled, not sure of the English, but chattered with the women for a moment, then proudly fell in with the Americans and marched away.

Stone put Terrance at the head of the column just behind a Laotian point man who was fifty yards ahead. Stone moved in beside the Americans marching between the smaller Lao troops.

"So far, so good," Anderson said. "Why didn't you let me get in on the shooting back there?"



"You know that already, Commander. I can't take a chance of you getting your ass shot off this close to your making it home."

"Yeah, but I got to get me at least one more of them bastards. The Viets are the ones I want."

"Hope to God you don't have the chance," Stone said. "I want a nice, quiet walk in the country the rest of the time, then a short chopper ride into Bangkok."

"Sounds good," Anderson conceded. "Guess I'll take it either way."

"How are your troops?" Stone asked quietly.

"Making it. Galloway feels better now. Rest of us are tough as old twenty-penny nails. We'll make it if we have to crawl on our bellies the last hundred miles."

"Yeah, I think you will. Hog said you got wet back there at the convoy."

"Got wet?"(3-1)

"Oh. Yeah, I put one little bastard out of his misery. But that's not even a down payment on what I owe those sonofabitches. Fifteen goddamn years! Hell, I've gone from hot top gun pilot to tired old man."

"What does that make you, thirty-seven or so?"

"Yeah, and single. No kids to support me."

"But no wife to try to remember."

"That would be damn tough."

They marched for two hours, then took a break. The jungle was so thick and dark there was no reason to move only at night. Someone would have to be within a hundred yards of them to spot them.

"We got enough clicks away from that roadblock?" Hog asked. "If we have, the four guys are getting damn tired."

Before Stone could answer, a man stepped from the jungle at the side of the narrow trail.

Hog's CAR-15 swung up, covering the man, then he recognized him from the yellow arm band. It was one of their Laotians.

Stone held up his hand, stopping the march.

"Where's Tran Hoi?" Stone demanded.

"Tran check out," the Laotian said. "All the time shoot, shoot." He touched his chest, his shoulder, then his forehead and held up both hands. "Tran check out. Gone bye-bye."

"Shit!" Hog brayed. "He was a damn good man."

Terrance shook his head. "Best trooper with a submachine gun I've ever watched. The man was an artist with it. Bloody hell!"

Stone shook the smaller man's hand. "I'm sorry about Tran. He was a good soldier. I'm glad you made it back. You're in charge of your countrymen now. What's your name?"

"Sanh Penh."

"Sanh, you talk with your men. Tell them what happened, and that you're in charge now. Understand?"

"Yes." He saluted and moved off.

"Find us a spot to sleep for six hours, Hog. I think the men need it." Stone watched Hog until he acknowledged. "Yeah, yeah. Damn shame about Tran."

A half hour later, they were a quarter of a mile off the trail over the low mountains. They distributed the fruit and ate it along with the C-rations in their packs. The four liberated men marveled at the glories of the C-rations.

"I can even eat the ham and lima beans!" Cunningham yelled.

After they ate, everyone but two guards went to sleep. The unending rain came soon again, this time in buckets, soaking everyone within a few seconds. Then there was no reason to try to stay dry.

Terrance huddled against a big teak tree, hoping to avoid some of the downpour.

"Bloody hell," he snarled to himself. "I can get rained on in London if that's what I want." He kept his Uzi assault pistol inside his shirt. It might help a little. "Sleep," he mumbled to himself. "Damn highly overrated, anyway. Who needs it?"

With daylight the rain tapered off to a soft, dripping, misty drizzle that kept them just as wet.

The liberated G.I.s relished the whole idea.

"Been years since we could walk around outside this way in the rain," Frenchy said softly. "Hell, I love it this way! I love it any way that means freedom!"

They marched again. Sloshed was more like it, Stone decided, as they slipped down one small hill and struggled up the next one. By noon the mists had cleared, and they worked their way out of the fog. The sun was out, up higher on the slopes.

Hog saw them first.

The big Texan tapped Stone on the shoulder with his CAR-15 and pointed across the ridge a mile away.

"Damned if I didn't just see a bunch of metal flashes over there."

"Where?" Stone queried.

"See that peak about there?" he pointed. "Down about a hand and then two fingers to the left. Watch it."

Three of them watched the spot for ten minutes. Four times they saw the glint of sun off shining metal.

"Bunch of fucking cowboys over there doing something," Hog snorted.

"Trouble is, old man, they are maneuvering in such a manner that they will intersect with our route." Terrance shook his head. "Damn poor planning by them."

"How many?" Stone asked.

Hog shrugged. "Who knows. Say one in ten lets something show. There could be a hundred of them."

"Not good odds, no matter who they are," Stone said. He turned, his eyes cold, squinting. "You hear anything?"

"Just my heart pumping and hoping," Terrance quipped.

"Stomach growls count?" Hog added.

Stone turned so one ear aimed the other direction. "Thought for sure I heard a chopper."

"Viets shouldn't have any choppers out this far. They keep the ones they captured closer to home."

"Closer to the three men who know how to repair them," Loughlin snorted.

Stone shrugged and looked at the spot where they had seen what must be troops, and then traced the line of march that would make them intersect.

"We're changing our compass heading," he said abruptly. "We'll swing due west now, which will put us across their trail but several miles behind them. We'll have to crash brush and swamp and jungle, but it should be worth it."

"A mile an hour," Hog grumbled.

"If we're bloody lucky."

"Don't bitch, let's do it." Stone's comment closed the discussion.

Even the Laos grumbled when they angled off the track of a trail and cut through the jungle. It was not as dense here on the slopes as it was in the damper valleys, but the mile-an-hour estimate was about right.

They stopped at the end of two hours and surveyed the damage. One of the Laotians had sprained an ankle, and another man had to help him walk. Galloway had suffered a painful but not serious injury from a branch snapping back and hitting him in the face.

Loughlin had gotten gouged on the leg when he tripped over some roots and hit a jagged stump. It was not exactly a good medical report, but Stone listened and figured they had been lucky.

"Halfway across," he reported to the troops. "Another two hours and we'll be back on the trail."

Loughlin looked skyward and then to the left. "You hear that? What was that sound?"

"A bird?" one of the released M.I.A.s asked.

"Sounded just a bit like a chopper, but there couldn't be any out here." Loughlin shook his head. "I'm bloody well starting to hear things that aren't there."

After a twenty-minute rest, Stone had the men on their feet and moving again. The going was slow. Machetes sang as the first three men had to hack their way through some dense growth that they could not detour around. They slowly worked across a ravine and up the other side.

They were halfway up when a rifle shot snarled through the heavy growth. The eleven Laotian freedom fighters and the Americans dug into the ever-wet jungle floor.

The Americans scattered, each picking a tree for cover. Another shot snarled and a man screamed. Sanh Penh shouted something and a soft reply came back.

Sanh Penh could see Stone. "My man hit bad," he said softly.

Loughlin had been walking behind Stone when the first shot sounded. Now he was within whispering distance, flat on his face in two inches of water.

"Stone, I'll work uphill and see who the bastards are."

"Go. Be careful."

Another rifle shot blasted into the jungle quiet and Loughlin reared up and dashed to a teak ten feet ahead. He made it. He lunged around it, darted in a zigzag pattern, and reached another tree.

He was crouched behind it, panting, when the first slug hit his tree. He was completely protected, but the shots kept targeting his tree, blasting it at various intervals. If he tried to go around it and forward he would be a sitting pigeon.

Loughlin slanted to the side and dove six feet to a smaller tree, but one large enough to cover him if he stood straight.

Twice more bullets thudded into his teak tree.

Loughlin scowled. "I'm pinned!" he shouted toward Stone.

"Stay," Stone's command came quickly.

Stone was unsure what had happened. His troops were taking fire on both ends, but nothing in the center. It wasn't automatic fire, the way most troops fought these days. The men above them were using precise sniper techniques, picking off targets as they showed themselves.

Penh crawled closer to Stone.

"Two men dead, two wounded. All Laotians."

Stone's scowl deepened. He would go see the problem himself. He caught Hog's attention.

"Stay and keep those M.I.A.s heads down!" Stone darted forward a dozen feet and sprawled behind a four-foot-thick log. He bent double and ran along forty feet of its length, then peered over.

Just as he did, a rifle slug jolted into the soft wood three feet behind him, tearing off an inch section of rotted wood. He dropped down. The end of the log was ten feet ahead. As he watched, a spaced pattern of rifle slugs slammed into the ground. It was a message: *Try to come this way and you die.*

He moved forward and the number of rifle rounds into the spot he would have to pass to move on uphill increased. Not a chance to get across there unscathed.

Damn it! What kind of a battle was this, anyway? He bent over and ran back to his men. Hog was in place, the Americans safe. Loughlin remained pinned down ten yards ahead.

Penh met Stone.

"Two more my men dead. One wounded. Not Vietnam fighters."

"Why do you think that?"

"Too slow. Fire only at Laotian."

Stone half-closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. That was it! The attackers were concentrating on the Laotians! They were trying to wipe out the escort. He turned to Hog.

"Every man get a firing position and shoot up the hill whether you have a target or not. Keep them on a single shot and let's get some action. Loughlin, you too."

For ten minutes the jungle rattled with rifle fire. No more Laotians were killed. Then smoke grenades sailed through the air smothering the center of the line, where the ex-M.I.A.s hid behind logs and trees.

Intense fire hit the left end of the Laotian line. There were no targets now. Penh and his men returned the fire the best they could, but the smoke was shifting their way. Green-clad troops surged forward, taking advantage of the cover of the heavy growth.

Loughlin pushed up beside Stone. "What for chrissakes is going on out there?"

"Wish I knew. All those shots at you. Did they really try to kill you, or just force you to stop?"

Loughlin frowned. "Yeah, yeah! They were containing me, boxing me in, pinning me down."

"So far we have four dead, all Laotians. Now the damned smoke. Somebody is playing games with us."

"Who is out there?"

“That’s what I want to find out.” Stone snarled. “And damn soon. Let’s work down where the Laotians are being hit and give them a hand.”

The Americans darted from tree to tree, then belly-crawled the last twenty yards and began returning fire.

A shout ripped through the jungles from thirty yards up the hill.

Sanh looked over at Stone, his eyes wide. “Somebody tell them cease fire!”

Stone nodded. “In about two minutes they’ll hit the other end of the line, where the rest of the Laotians are.”

“Somebody is trying to strip us?”

“Yeah, and without touching a hair on our American heads.” Wiley swore softly. “I say it’s time we haul ass out of here.”

“I’m with you, buddy. Pull back and regroup. Let’s find out who’s playing games with our heads!”

Before they could move, automatic rifle fire erupted downhill from them. The slugs tore through trees at the other end of the Laotian troops.

“Where the hell did those guys come from?” Stone grunted.

Loughlin had turned his CAR-15 and unleashed half a magazine in the direction of the second front. They were being hit from both sides.

“I don’t know where the hell they came from,” Loughlin bellowed, “but if we don’t get out of here, our asses are up for grabs!”

## Chapter 4

Before Stone and Loughlin could take a step, rifle fire stuttered, whipping hot lead over their heads and into the trees. They both dove into the jungle floor and returned fire.

“How the hell did they know we were here?” Loughlin sent another five rounds down the hill.

“That must have been a chopper we heard,” Stone snorted. “Somebody’s been tracking us.”

They jolted from tree to tree and worked quickly back to the liberated Americans. There had been no fire directed at them.

Hog held up his hands in wonder.

“Don’t ask me,” Stone snapped. “All I can figure is some kind of trap.”

“They’re hitting both ends,” Hog snorted.

“How do we keep these guys alive?” Loughlin growled.

“We pull our men into a concentrated circle,” Stone motioned, “and fire in all directions.”

“Only the Laos don’t have time,” Hog protested. “They’re getting pinched from both sides.”

Screams slanted through the heavy growth.

A grenade went off with a shattering crack.

“Damn it! I’m going back down there. You guys bunch up and get ready for a fight.” Stone grabbed a spare AK-47 and slung it on his shoulder, pushed the safety off the CAR-15, and ran toward the Laotians he had just left.

He charged toward them, using what cover he could. The enemy fire slacked off as he ran the last ten yards, dove behind a log, and found Sanh Penh. The smaller man shook his head.

“Too many guns,” the Lao said. “I send one man away, but they find him, kill.”

There were three Laotians fighting from the small area around the big log. They moved from side to side when the fighting became worse on one side.

A man at Penh’s side moved to reload his weapon, and two slugs ripped into his chest, killing him instantly.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Penh. Seems like the fighters out there aren’t firing at any of us Americans.”

Penh spat out a string of Laotian words to vent his anger. Then he shrugged.

“Trap. We in trap. Kill all.”

“Exfiltrate, Pehn. Get the hell out of here.”

“Tried. Enemy all around.” He made a circle motion with his hand. “No escape. Kill all we can.”

Stone edged around the end of the log, saw a pair of green clad figures lunging for a tree, and triggered the CAR-15 on full automatic. There was no return fire at Stone’s position.

Pulling a smooth frag grenade from his combat harness, Stone popped the safety pin. Then, looking just over the top of the log, he spotted another man rushing forward. He threw the grenade and saw it lift the enemy soldier off the ground, shattering his body with fifty pieces of deadly shrapnel.

The three Laos were firing at everything that moved, but the uniformed troops kept working closer. Still, they would not use grenades. Stone threw his last two, then emptied his Russian rifle and tossed it aside.

With the CAR-15, he hosed down a pair of green-shirted soldiers charging the log.

Another Lao caught a fatal round.

Penh sent one man rushing back toward the Americans, but he was cut down at once. Only Penh was left. He rose and screamed at the enemy, held his finger on the trigger of the AK-47, and ran toward the guns. His yells penetrated the thick jungle for a few paces, then were swallowed up as twenty rifles concentrated bursts of automatic fire on his body. He twisted and jolted, then stumbled and fell dead into the green mold of the wet jungle floor.

All firing at the position stopped.

Stone edged up, but could not see the enemy. The green-clad troops had vanished. He heard firing from the other end of the line, and ran in that direction. No shots were aimed at him.

When he came to the Americans, they reported no enemy fire had come their way.

“Like a fucking church around here,” Hog brayed. “Where’s the action?”

“They wiped out all the Laos on my end, then pulled back. Damn strange.”

Stone took Hog with him and they rushed toward the Laos at the other end of their short combat line. Firing eased off and by the time they got there, there was no more battle. Hog and Stone found the last of the Laotian freedom fighters. All were dead. Three had been bayoneted.

There were no enemy soldiers dead.

The jungle steamed in the hot sunshine. By the time Hog and Stone got back to the other Americans, there was still no firing.

"They wiped out the Laos and didn't scratch our bloody skins," Loughlin spat. "What the hell does that mean?"

Stone sat on a log and shook his head. "It means we've been had. Somebody knows we're here. That somebody is big enough and strong enough to put the guerilla troops to work for them, and tell them who to kill and when to come back."

"Then that was a chopper we heard?"

"Bet the farm on it," Stone grunted.

"Those slants sure as hell weren't interested in us," Hog grunted. "Damn well don't see how that's possible. They couldn't have been Viets. Those bastards would have busted a gut to take us down."

Anderson came into the group and listened.

"You mean those troops out there were gunning only for the Laotians?"

"About the shitty size of it," Hog snarled.

"They could have taken us out?"

Hog snorted. "Like hot shit off a cold sidewalk. We all should be corpses right now. Worm meat."

"That makes the *why* that much more important," Stone directed. "Let's find a cleared spot."

They hiked up the hill until Hog spotted a rocky slope to the left. There was a small flat area big enough for a chopper to land. They angled toward the clearing.

Once there, they sat down and waited. Five minutes later they heard a chopper coming in low and fast. It pulled up out of the valley, circled once to check out the wind, and came in for a gentle touchdown, fifty feet from the seven Americans.

"A damn UH-1D," Stone bellowed to be heard over the *whup-whup-whup* of the bird. The rotor kept turning at idle to let it cool down, then died. This kind of bird had been used extensively in the Vietnam War, often on first-wave attacks with fourteen fully equipped troopers ready to fight. The doors popped open. The U.S. insignia on the side had been nearly painted out with a spray can.

For a moment no one could be seen on board the chopper, then a familiar figure stepped out of the aircraft and laughed softly. He wore a lightweight sports shirt and snow-white pants.

"Coleman!" Stone snarled. "I should have known."

As he spoke, a door-mounted M-60 machine gun swiveled into place covering the group.

"Greetings, gentlemen." Alan Coleman smiled. Then, to the M.I.A.s, loudly, "Let me welcome you former prisoners of war. This craft is operated by the United States government. You've made it. You're free men!"

"You the assholes who got fourteen of my Lao friends killed?" Anderson demanded, swinging his AK-47 up to cover the grinning CIA man.

"Easy, soldier. I'm here to help."

"You had our escort butchered, *right?*"

Coleman frowned. Two more men stepped from the chopper. Coleman ignored Anderson and addressed the other M.I.A.s.

“Gentlemen, these are agents Keith Donner and Phil Lawson, both of whom work with me in the intelligence branch of your government. It is important that we get you on board the craft and back to Bangkok as quickly as possible.”

“Answer me or you die where you stand!” Anderson shouted heatedly.

“Yes, all right. Just calm down. There was a tactical error made by the force that met you. We were informed you were being held by Vietnam troops and were being taken back to your camp. Naturally we instructed the attacking force to eliminate the Vietnamese and not harm the Americans.”

“Bullshit!” Hog Wiley shouted. “You knew damn well who we were. You *knew* Stone and us were here! You *knew* we had Laotian freedom fighters with us. I say we blow these CIA bastards out of the way, and take over the chopper!”

Stone touched Hog’s shoulder.

“Careful, Hog. Coleman will open up with that M-60 if he has to. He’d just as soon cut us down as slit our throats.”

Anderson motioned to the other former prisoners and they all walked in front.

“I’d say, Agent Coleman, that you’re now in a position where you *have* to negotiate.”

“Look, whoever you are—”

“Commander Farley T. Anderson. U.S. Navy pilot. Hell, I might be a captain by now.” He turned to Stone. “You know this sonofabitch?”

Stone nodded. “Too well. Crossed paths with him in Bangkok a few times. He thinks he’s the president’s gift to the whole damn world.”

“Should we take him out?” Anderson asked. “You give the word and he and his buddies are dead meat.”

Stone laughed softly and stared at Coleman. “You ready to die, Coleman? How about that. You get blasted by a former M.I.A. because he didn’t like your personality.”

“Drop your weapons, Stone, Wiley, Loughlin. All three of you are in violation of U.S. law. Don’t make the charges against you any worse than they are.”

“Charges!” Anderson exploded. “What are you talking about? These men risked their lives to come in and get us! I didn’t see *you* trading hot lead with those Vietnamese regulars back there. You didn’t walk twenty miles through the mud and rain in the damn jungle!”

“Anderson, just relax, take it easy,” Coleman said. “I can see you’re under a great strain. These three men have certain, uh, problems with the U.S. government, but nothing that can’t be worked out. Hell, you can testify if you want to. Just put down the weapons so we can get out of here before the Vietnamese spot us.”

“We used to call you CIA guys *spooks*. Hell, spook, I’m in no hurry. I’ve lived here for fifteen fucking years waiting for assholes like you to come get me. Why should I rush now?” He looked at the three other former prisoners. “You guys in any rush to see Bangkok?” They all shook their heads and kept their AK-47s aimed at the three CIA men.

Coleman wiped a white handkerchief across his sweating forehead.

“Commander Anderson, let me explain it to you a little more. Stone and his freelancers have been dabbling in this M.I.A. issue for some time. They are actually hindering our attempt to find and bring you men out. We discovered he



was on a mission to rescue whoever was on that truck convoy. We don't know how he found out about it, but frankly, we followed his progress.

"When we saw that he was in the hands of Orientals, we had to assume they were hostile, and we had to act."

"Bullshit," Anderson retorted. "Why would Vietnamese be taking us toward the Thai border? You know they keep the P.O.W.s as close to their own border as possible."

"Good logic," Coleman countered, "but not true. The invading Vietnamese forces use all of Laos as if it were their own territory. Now why don't we all get on board? We have cold beer, some deli sandwiches, and all the ice cream you can eat. Let's get loaded up and move out, then we can discuss the fine points of the law and your loyalties."

"Jesus, Coleman, but you are stupid," Stone snapped.

"Stupid but slick. You bring in some guerilla troops to wipe out our escort knowing damn well we can't hike out of here by ourselves without some firepower. Now you put on the pitch to these guys with food and drink they haven't seen in fifteen years. You're *shit*, you know that, Coleman?"

Coleman ignored Stone. "Gentlemen, all four of you are welcome right now to bring your rifles along as souvenirs. One way or another we have to lift off from here in two minutes. What do you say?"

Galloway dropped the rifle. "I just want to get home. I don't care about the politics." He walked over toward Coleman, who shook his hand and helped him board the chopper.

Anderson looked at Stone. "He gonna hang you, buddy?"

"He'll try. Better men than him have tried."

"He won't keep you from helping the rest of those poor slobs who are still back here in bamboo cages?"

"No way he can do that unless he kills me. If he does that, I know he'll have to answer to you on the end of a .45 automatic."

"Shit, yes! Be my pleasure!"

Anderson pushed the safety of his rifle to the on position, brought it to port arms and walked toward the chopper. The other two former M.I.A.s did the same.

"You're next, Stone," Coleman spat, enjoying his victory.

Stone walked up to Coleman and handed him his CAR-15. When both of Coleman's hands were on the weapon, Stone hit him with a short right fist that knocked him flat onto the rocks.

Stone never looked at him, but simply walked forward and climbed into the chopper. A mess man was dishing up food for the troops.

Stone shook his head, slumped against the side of the ship, and slid down to a sitting position.

When Coleman got in, he kept one hand over his right eye. He glared at Stone from the left one.

"Coleman, you asshole. You win this round. But the fight is just beginning between you and me."

"Wrong, wiseguy. We've got your ass nailed to the deck for ten to twenty. You and Wiley and Loughlin are hereby officially placed under arrest by the U.S. government. You will be transported to Los Angeles, where formal charges will be

brought and a trial conducted. Take a last look at Laos, Stone. Your M.I.A. hunting days are over.”

## Chapter 5

Three weeks later to the day, Mark Stone, Terrance Loughlin, and Hog Wiley were arraigned in Federal district court in Los Angeles.

They had been held in Bangkok for a week, then flown home and housed in the Federal detention center for a week before the proceedings.

The courtroom doors had been closed and only the U.S. Attorney for Los Angeles and the two defense lawyers were allowed inside. The bailiff rose and read a prepared statement.

“In the case of Stone, Loughlin, and Wiley vs. the United States, the government has asked that, due to the sensitive nature of this matter, and in the interests of national security, the court be closed to the press and the public, and all proceedings be sealed. Judge Rothford J. Mattingham so orders.

“Now, all rise. The United States District court in Los Angeles is now in session. The right Honorable Rothford J. Mattingham presiding.”

After the judge walked in, everyone sat except David D. David, Mark Stone’s attorney. Carol Jenner, Stone’s “lady” and assistant, had flown to California from Washington the moment she heard Stone had been arrested. She searched for the best criminal lawyer she could find, and paid the retainer fee herself. By the time Stone used his one phone call from the federal lockup, he already had a lawyer.

“Your honor, you have received my brief protesting this whole series of legal blunders. There is not one shred of misconduct or illegal action by my clients that comes within the jurisdiction of this court. The entire case is a puffery of the CIA because it couldn’t do its job overseas.

“My clients were kidnapped by the CIA in a foreign nation with no legal authorization to do so. My clients were then illegally transported through various foreign nations and at last flown to Los Angeles where they were illegally charged with trumped-up felonies. The whole scenario carries with it truly horrendous police state ramifications.”

“Mr. David, if I could get a word in here, in my own court, let me remind you that this is an arraignment, not a trial. You’ll have ample time to argue both the law and the facts of the case. Now, shall we proceed?”

The legal machinery ground slowly on. The three men were charged with illegal entry into a foreign nation not recognized by the United States government. They were charged with possessing fully automatic firearms, assault and battery upon a federal official, illegal currency transfers, and the illegal use of an official U.S. government passport.

David rose and watched the judge after the charges were read. “Your honor, the charges illustrate my basic objection. None of these particulars, even if true, were committed within the jurisdiction of this court. The only felony charge, assault and battery, took place in Laos, clearly out of this court’s jurisdiction. I move that the charges be dismissed and the case thrown out of court.”

“Motion denied. How do the defendants plead?”

They all said they were not guilty.

“Your honor, we request a speedy trial and pre-trial hearings.”

“Granted. The clerk will schedule it within the ninety-day limit.” Judge Mattingham studied papers on his desk. “The United States attorney has requested a million-dollar bail for each man. I can’t justify that.”

He looked at the charges. “Unusual, to say the least. Bail is hereby set at \$25,000 for each defendant. Mr. Stone, the state has been notified of the charges against you, and I have a letter from the proper board rescinding your private investigator’s license in the State of California as of this date. You are hereby ordered not to perform in any capacity duties relating to private investigation work.”

It took Carol Jenner two days to find a bail bondsman who would take Mark’s house in Venice as collateral for the \$75,000 bail for the three of them and the \$7,500 he had to put in cash. When the necessary papers were signed, the four of them were momentarily free to walk the streets.

“Longest I’ve ever been locked up,” Hog snarled into his beer. “Don’t like it one little shitty bit.”

“So what now?” Terrance asked.

Stone considered these two hellground buddies with whom he had shared so much. “You two deserve a vacation. Nobody is shot up for a change. Let’s take a week off. I’ll talk to our lawyer and see what he really thinks. If he decides the feds can make any of this stick, we’ll be doing better to walk away from it.”

“Your house, you’ll lose it!” Carol said. Stone kissed her cheek. To him, she was a midnight fantasy: long blonde hair that shimmered like liquid gold, a model’s figure, and the face of a movie star, with a smile that Stone would walk through fire to see.

“If we got a year in prison, I couldn’t live in that house anyway. And in another year a lot more M.I.A.s are going to die over there.

“The feds are going to be watching us like one-eyed shotgunners from now on. They picked up our passports, hoping to keep us in the States. If we travel we’ll have to leave the country without them. Probably Mexico if we need to go. Let’s split up. That way it’ll be harder to keep tabs on all of us. I’ll stay here for a couple of weeks, working with David. He said he’ll try to get the charges reduced and some dismissed. He’ll know how much he can do in two or three weeks.

“The first preliminary hearing couldn’t come for at least a month. We’ll have to keep in touch somehow. Remember that Soldier of Fortune bar, and the blowhard who runs it, out in Venice? He keeps a confidential registry of names and contacts and mail forwarding for a few bucks. Let’s use him if we move out.”

“Old Duffy. He talks a good war, but that’s as close to fighting as he ever got.” Hog scowled.

“He’s our clearing house.”

The three men stared at each other a minute, shook hands, then went in three different directions.

Carol put her arm through Stone’s and pulled tightly against him. “There are some important papers for you to sign. I left them at my hotel room.”

Stone smiled. “I don’t think I even know the address. Would you drive?”

She did. A half hour later they were out of the downtown traffic and in the parking lot of a high-rise hotel on the edge of Santa Monica.

“That fed job still pay as well as it did before?”

“Better. I got a raise. I’m now one of three chief intelligence processors for the Defense Department. I heard about Coleman picking up you guys, so I took my vacation. I want to be here so I can help out.”

Before they left the car, he touched her shoulder. She leaned forward, and kissed him tenderly on the lips.

Breaking away with a sigh, she grinned and touched his cheek with the side of her hand.

“Does that kiss give away the idea why I really want to get you into my hotel room?”

“A little. Let’s go.”

On the way up to her room, she gave him a packet of mail she had picked up at his house in Venice. He had given her a key on her last trip to the coast. Carrying the mail in one hand, he put his arm around Carol. The mail could wait.

Upstairs she closed the door and leaned against it as if she would never let him out of the room.

“It’s bad this time, isn’t it? You’ve had scrapes with the Company before and with the FBI guys, but this time it certainly looks worse than before.”

“It’s serious, but not fatal. Coleman tried to tie us up in a neat package for the feds, but most of it won’t hold up in court.”

“Still, they could keep your passport, restrict you to the U.S.?”

“They could try.” He dropped the mail on the dresser, took her hand and led her to the queen-sized bed. He kissed her gently. She kissed him back, then pushed him down on the bed and lay on top of him, kissing his eyes, nose, cheeks, and then his lips.

When she finished, she rose and unbuttoned her blouse. A moment later she slipped it off.

“I’ve been waiting weeks to see you, Mark Stone,” she whispered. Then there was no need for any more words.

Two hours later, Stone stepped out of the shower and groped for a towel. One was thrust into his hands, then Carol laughed and began to dry his back.

“You take long showers.”

He turned and saw her wearing a loose robe. He kissed her and they went out of the steam.

“I like long showers. Anything interesting in the mail?”

“A tax bill, lots of advertisements, and three contests that I entered for you.”

“Thanks a trunkful. Nothing else?”

“Yes, a letter from a Mrs. José Ortega.” Carol sighed and sat down on the bed. “She phoned when I was at your place yesterday. I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“José Ortega? I was with him in ’Nam that first hitch. He came home under a flag.” Stone glanced up quickly. “Is his widow in some kind of trouble?”

“Yes, but you can’t help her. Remember what the judge said. You do any PI work and you’ll be in contempt of court.”

Stone’s brow turned into deep furrows as he held out his hand. “Let’s have the letter.”

“Oh, boy. A girl can get in trouble around this guy. I should have burned it. Damn.” She went to the dresser and took a letter from the second drawer.

Stone looked at it a minute, opened the small envelope, then settled down to read the handwritten note.

*Dear Sgt. Stone,*

*I pray to Mother Mary that you are safe and well and that you do not have to go back to Vietnam again. I am well, but I am having problems with José Junior. He’s a good boy, but he’s fifteen now and thinks he knows everything.*

*He wants to quit school and get a job so he can buy a lowrider car. I make him stay in school. He’s running around with a bunch of bad kids now, they have cars, and I know he’s smoking pot. He’s always talking about the harder stuff and he told me he tried cocaine once.*

*I really don’t know what to do. If you could have a talk with him, I know it would help. He knows how you and his father fought together in ’Nam. I know he misses his father, but what can I do? He’s taller than I am now, and strong.*

*I’m afraid I’m losing him, Sgt. Stone. If you can’t help me, the only thing I can do is go to the police. I really don’t want to do that. I just pray to Mother Mary that you will help us. Vaya con Dios.*

*Maria Ortega*

The letter had been dated almost two weeks ago. “Look up her phone number,” Stone said.

A quick look through the directory and with the information operator showed no phone under that name at any address.

Stone looked up, his frown softening as he watched Carol dressing.

“I need to borrow your car.”

“No way. I’ll drive. I’m your new chauffeur. And I know how to find the Ortega address. I looked it up yesterday, just in case.”

“Let’s go.”

Carol giggled. “I really think I’d better put a skirt on first or we’ll be back at the police station.”

They found the Ortega place an hour later. It was in one of the barrios of Los Angeles, where the houses were close together and cut up into small apartments. Walls, fences, and sidewalks were covered with spray-can graffiti, most of it defining one street gang’s turf and taunting anyone to try to cross into it.

Carol pulled the rented Thunderbird to a stop at the curb in front of 2425 Loma Point and Stone looked at the house. It was an old building, with peeling paint and a broken window. “Seen worse,” he said. “Come on.”

A ten-year-old boy stood beside the fender of the light blue car. Carol looked at Stone questioningly. Stone pulled out a pair of dollar bills and waved them at the boy.

“English?” he asked. The boy nodded. “You keep the peritos off this car and you’ll get two bucks. Okay?”

The boy nodded. Stone tore the bills in half, gave two pieces to the boy and put the other two in his pocket. “What’s your name?”

“Pedro.”

“You do a good job, Pedro, or I’ll hunt up your ass and whomp you good, you understand?”

Pedro grinned and nodded.

The Ortega apartment was number four, upstairs and in back.

They both went up the stairs, stepped over a drunk passed out on the landing who had vomited. They heard loud voices, then moved past the apartment to the last one.

Stone knocked. A moment later the door opened a crack and Stone saw the chain holding out.

“Mrs. Ortega. I knew your husband, I’m Mark Stone.”

“*Gracias a dios!*” the woman said. She closed the door so she could take off the chain, then opened it fully. Mrs. Ortega was in her late thirties and was wearing a tattered print dress. Her black hair straggled around her shoulders, and she pushed up thick glasses to look at her visitors.

“Come in! Thank you for coming. I don’t know what to do! I just can’t tell Junior anything.” She wheeled away and walked to the far wall, then came back. They stepped back into the room, and Carol closed the door.

The apartment was too small for all the used furniture that had been jammed into it. The TV set played on a daytime soap. Mrs. Ortega put down a fast food hamburger, still in the wrapper, that was half-eaten.

She came back and held out her hand. “Excuse, I am Maria Ortega. Wife of José who you knew in Vietnam.” She blinked back tears. “He was a good man, Mr. Stone. The good die young, no?”

“José Ortega was a good man, Mrs. Ortega. I’m proud to say that I was in the same outfit he was. We fought side by side. I’m sorry he never got through the war.”

“Yes, sorry. Now part-time job, son who don’t obey his *madre*. What can I do?”

“Drugs, Mrs. Ortega?”

“*Si*. And a bad bunch. They must be pushers. I don’t know any more. José talks to me only sometimes.”

“Could I look in his room?”

“Yes. Anything. He come home soon, maybe. Sometimes stay out all night.”

She took Stone and Carol down the hall to a door that sagged and was hard to open. She forced it inward. The room was dark. The woman went to the window and pulled back thick drapes.

“No know why he keep it so dark.”

The light showed why. The walls were papered with posters of punkers and heavy metal rock & rollers. On a small table sat a roach pin and three stubs of brown paper cigarettes. To one side lay two decks of playing cards, and a switchblade knife.

A centerfold of a nude girl had been taped to one wall. Mrs. Ortega darted toward it and ripped it down. She scowled in embarrassment and wadded up the picture.

“That’s the most normal thing in here, Mrs. Ortega. The roach clip, the roaches, and marijuana cigarettes are what’ll get José into trouble.”

Stone checked the small dresser, looking under a few clothes, but found nothing unusual.

“Have you seen him using any kind of pills? Uppers, downers, anything like that?”

“No. No. I don’t see him.”

Stone lifted out the top drawer and looked at the underside of the bottom. He scowled and tore off a three-inch-long plastic envelope that had been taped there. It was a baggie type that sealed itself and could be opened and re-closed.

He put the drawer back and opened the envelope. A sniff, then a gentle taste with his finger told him.

“Angel Dust. PCP. You’ve heard of it, Mrs. Ortega?”

“*Si. Muy* bad.”

“Worse than bad. PCP can turn a man into a maniac, with the strength of six. It rots out the brain. It’s one of the easiest drugs to make. This is enough to put both you and your son into prison for ten years.”

“*Madre de Cristo!* Take it out of here! I want nothing to do with it. *Nada!*”

They went back to the small living room. Stone continued into the kitchen where he turned the faucet in the sink on and filled the plastic bag with water, melting the PCP, and poured it all down the sink.

Back in the living room, Maria turned off a soap opera and sat down, twisting the hem of her skirt in her hands. “Can you help José Junior?”

“I don’t know. How old is he?”

“Fifteen. Only fifteen—just a baby!”

Stone shook his head. “When I was fifteen I was worried about making my bicycle work and my kite fly.” He stared at Mrs. Ortega. “For José’s sake, I’ll try. Are you working?”

“Yes. Nights. I clean. So I can’t be home when I should. He has partied here at night, with girls.”

“Don’t worry about the girls. It’s the PCP and the drug crowd. They can get him killed before he’s sixteen.”

The shock of it hit her like a slap in the face. She jolted backward, then stretched her forehead upward, making the whites of her eyes show. A moment later, she cried.

Carol sat beside her, put her arm around the woman and comforted her, letting her cry it out. When she was finished she looked up, her eyes red, her nose running.

“What can I do?”

“Tell me all you can about these so-called friends of José. Tell me if he runs with one of the Chicano gangs. Tell me all you know about José and we’ll have a chance.”

A minute later, she got beers for all of them from the small refrigerator. She then spelled the situation out in detail, and by the time Stone and Carol left the apartment a half hour later, he figured he had a fifty-fifty chance.

At the street he gave Pedro the other half of the two one-dollar bills, and added a third. The T-bird was not scratched. Carol drove Stone a half-dozen blocks to a 7-Eleven store where he got out.

“What did the judge say about your not doing any private investigation work?”

“This isn’t work. No client, no fee. I’m trying to help out a friend.”

"You going to be all right down here? This is what I'd call a tough neighborhood."

"You could come and hold my hand. These *macho baby hombres* would turn cartwheels for a *gringa* like you."

"On second thought, maybe I'll wait for a pick-up call for your taxi service." She wrote down a number on a card and pushed it in his brown slacks pocket. "Good luck, Mark."

He waved good-bye as she drove away, then walked into the fast food store. Los Hombres, José's gang, were not holding a meeting yet. He bought an instant lottery ticket, did not win anything, and went across the street and around the block.

After a few minutes, he strolled back into the store and bought a cold beer, put it in a small sack and stared at the Chicano youth behind the counter.

"You live around here?" he asked.

The Latino boy, sixteen or seventeen, nodded.

"Just wondered," Stone said and walked out. He ambled slowly around a different square block this time, and when he came back, a lowrider purred in the far end of the parking lot. It was a chopped 1974 Chevy, so low that it had a ground clearance of no more than two inches. Illegal, but all the rage with the Chicanos who could afford one.

Six Latino youths clustered around the car. Stone leaned against the side of the building and finished his beer. Two of the youths watched him. He threw the beer can and sack into a dumpster. He felt overdressed, wearing slacks and a sport shirt in the eighty-degree weather. Most of the patrons of the 7-Eleven store wore jeans and T-shirts.

A second lowrider snaked into the lot, cracking and sputtering as it parked next to the first one. This closed car contained four more youths, all with what he could see now were T-shirts with lettering on them.

Stone adjusted his belt, made sure the heavy buckle was exactly in the center of his slacks, then walked over toward the two cars.

The two lookouts who had been watching him jumped easily off the fender and moved toward him, ten feet apart. They were well-built, nearly six feet tall, and maybe eighteen years old. They stopped when he was between them.

"Going somewhere, *gringo*?"

"Your cars? Nice."

"Si, nice. Now haul ass."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Get lost. Tell the narcs we didn't steal it. We spotted you the minute you stepped on the lot."

"I'm not with the police, or the courts. I want to see José Ortega."

"So?"

"Is he here yet?"

"Who said he was coming?"

One of them flicked open a switchblade with one hand and began to clean his fingernails. The other one let the butt of a handgun show in his jacket pocket.

"Now, you got more business here, or you about ready to walk your ass down the street?"



"I got business with José. Get your butts back to the car and tell him to come over here, or I'll kick you all the way home."

They both laughed and each took a step forward. Stone pressed a catch on his belt, slid it out of the three loops with one quick jerk and grasped the free end. The heavy belt buckle snaked out sharply, slapped the knife from the fingernail cleaner's hand, and smashed one finger in the process.

Stone whirled, the belt slashing in the air like a bullwhip until it wrapped around the second guard's forearm, jolting the small automatic from his fingers and dumping him on the ground.

Stone moved like a fast-break lead man and pushed his boot into the small of the gunman's back, pinning him to the blacktop.

"Now, you with the busted finger. Go back over there and tell them I'll trade this pile of shit for José Ortega. Any mistakes and this one loses his balls in about ten seconds. You understand me, *perito*?"

The youth held his right hand with his left, his eyes wide as he nodded, then ran back to the pair of lowriders, where more than a dozen Chicano youth had witnessed the takedown.

Stone saw the message delivered. There was a moment of talk, then the fourteen Chicano youth with "Los Hombres" printed on the front of the T-shirts left the cars, formed an elbow-to-elbow line, and moved forward. As they came, Stone saw that each carried a weapon of some sort: motorcycle chain, a longshoreman's hand hook, a sawed-off pool cue, a cut-down baseball bat.

None of them looked as if this were a new experience. Stone stared at them, wondering which one would make the first mistake.

## Chapter 6

Stone watched the fourteen youths march across the lot.

"Which one of you is Ortega?"

No one responded.

"Ortega, I want to tell you what your father said to me before he died in Vietnam."

The line wavered. Some of them looked at a thin youth in the middle of the formation who held a bike chain. He took two more steps, then hesitated.

"You were in 'Nam, man?"

"Yes. I was with José Ortega. I saw him hit, I killed the slant who shot him. Then I held Ortega's head in my lap when he died."

The line of marchers faltered, then stopped when the leader did. They began looking at each other.

One of the young men in the line scowled, stared at the leader a moment. He wiped his hand across his face, then stepped out and frowned at the lone *gringo* twenty feet in front of him.

"What's your name?"

"Stone. Used to be Sergeant Mark Stone. Your dad was with the 325th Regiment."

“Yeah, I know.” The youth took a quick drag on a cigarette and shrugged. “So if we talk, what can a dead man tell me that I don’t know?”

“One hell of a lot, if you’ll listen. Tell your playmates to go back to their lowriders and we’ll parley.”

The leader looked through a smirk covering his face. “Go ahead, José. We can break this guy’s balls anytime we want.”

José dropped his chain and pushed it into his pocket, then swaggered away from the line, pointing to the side of the store, where the sun burned down against the white painted cinderblocks.

Stone walked over and sat down, leaning against the warm masonry. José did the same, but six feet away.

“So?” José asked. He was slight, maybe five feet eight, with long hair on the top and sides, cut into a duck tail of the fifties.

“Your dad was in my squad when we took out a Viet Cong patrol down near the delta. We had half of them pinned down with automatic rifle fire.”

The kid shook his head. “Look, man. I don’t want to hear no damn war story.”

Stone watched him a minute. His toughness was peeling off.

“Your dad was a good soldier.”

“Hell, yeah, he got drafted. But he must not have been good enough. He got himself killed. You didn’t. Why is that?”

“Pure chance, José. It doesn’t mean he was not a good soldier. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That don’t help a damn bit to bring him back. I never even saw my father, you know that?”

“Happens. That mean the world owes you a living?”

“I work for what I get.”

“Driving for a dope pusher. That’s work?”

“Who the hell’s been...” He nodded. “Yeah, sure. Good old mom. She called you, right?” He started to get up. “I’m out of here.”

“Sit down and shut up, José, or I’m all over you like a cement jacket. I didn’t come down here to get shit on by some snot-nosed kid who isn’t man enough to help out his mother.”

Stone moved next to José before the youth could get away.

“You want to yell for help from your little playmates and prove to them that you aren’t a man, go ahead. I can handle them, and more. I killed over a hundred men in Vietnam, punk. A few more don’t mean shit to me!”

José slumped, the bravado draining away. His face worked but he didn’t cry. “Why you bothering with me?”

“You feel some sort of allegiance to this gang, right? In war when men are dying all around you, the bond is a million times stronger. A few men become tight friends. People die for each other out there. Your dad took a slug that should have been mine. He got himself killed when he didn’t have to. He was pulling my shot-up carcass behind a log to save my ass.”

“I didn’t know.”

“That’s why I’m here. In the past three hours I’ve found out a lot about the street gang over there. Some smart pusher has conned you all into working for

him, not only here, but out in the desert as well, at his *horse barn*. Fact is, you're scheduled to be out there tonight. Only you can't make it, José."

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"Want to bet your life on it, José? That's what it could come down to tonight. I know all about the PCP operation out there. That shit is poison, man. Gets you killed damn quick, one way or the other."

"I don't use it, man. I'm not that stupid."

"But you're stupid enough to risk a ten- to twenty-year prison term for producing, distributing, and selling. You missed some of your smarts somewhere, José."

"Not your problem."

"It is, kid. Your mother made it my problem. What you're going to do is stand up, signal your buddies that all is cool, and we'll go into the store. There's a side entrance that we'll be out of like lightning."

"No way. You move without my signal and they'll be all over you."

"So make the signal, José. I've got a .45 automatic in my pocket that will blow your guts out and you die nice and slow. Which is it going to be, José? You want to live past this afternoon or not?"

"Jeez, you don't fight fair."

"Whoever said life was fair, kid? Now stand up, give the sign, and we're out of here."

José shrugged. "Yeah, why not. I still don't think you can do it."

They stood, stretched, and José gave a signal that Stone did not catch. He ambled around the corner to go in the store, and Stone followed him. They walked quicker then, went inside. Stone grabbed José's arm and pulled him out the far side door.

Standing in front of the exit were three of the biggest members of the gang. One swung a bike chain, a second had a cut-off pool cue, and the third a five-inch blade.

"Thought you might try to run," the leader with the chain spat. He took a step forward, the other two moving to the sides so they had Mark surrounded.

Without a word, Stone threw José forward, slamming him into the leader, and the two went down in a tangle of arms, legs, and bike chain.

Stone pivoted and slammed a *fumikomi*, a front stamp kick, into the youth on the left. He went down with a scream. Stone looked to his right and saw the knife man thrusting hard. He threw up his hands into a *juji-uke*, a crossed arm X block, catching the knifer's wrist, avoiding the blade.

In the same motion, he slammed a short front-thrust kick, a *mae geri kekomi*, into the man's crotch, and he went down with a scream of rage and pain.

Stone saw the leader scramble back to his feet, swinging the heavy chain. Mark still held the belt. He slashed it out, wrapped the heavy buckle around the swinging chain, and jerked it free of the Chicano's hand.

José stood to the side, not sure whether to leave or stay, whether or not to call the other members.

Stone glared at the Mexican gang leader. "Get the hell out of here while you're still able to walk."

"Eat shit!"

The second gang member got to his feet and they both rushed Stone. He waited for them, then jumped and sent a *tobi geri*, a leaping kick which caught the leader on the chin and knocked him down and out.

When Stone landed, he was already launching a *yoko hiji ate*, a sideways elbow smash. His elbow caught the second gang member on the side of the neck, spilling him to the ground, where he sat groggy and not sure where he was.

Stone turned to José. The boy's jaw dropped open in amazement.

"How did you do that?" José asked.

"A few basics and a lot of practice," Stone said. He was not even breathing hard. "It's a matter of knowing when to use what blow and where to aim it. Now, we were about to get out of here. Are you ready to come with me, or do you want to hang around with a pack of losers like these?"

"Damn! Can you teach me to do that, that karate?"

Stone watched him. "Come on." They walked away from the 7-Eleven store and down the street. "Tell you what, José. You promise me that you'll get a job to help out your mom, and I'll buy you three months of lessons at the toughest karate studio in town. You have to promise to finish the three months. Then you can use some of your job money to take more classes."

"A job! Only suckers work for a living."

"That what the gang teaches you? There may not be many Los Hombres left after tonight. You want to learn karate or not?"

José looked back over his shoulder, but none of the gang members were coming after him. He kicked a rock with worn-out jogging shoes, and at last nodded.

"Yeah, I guess. I want to get good at it."

"Takes lots of practice, at least an hour a day of working out, doing exercises, learning the moves."

"I can do that."

"And school. When fall comes, you're back in school. You expect your mom to support you all your life?"

"School?"

"Damn right. Get an education. If you don't have at least two years of college these days, you're more than likely to wind up on welfare. Especially being a Chicano, you have it tougher. So get that high school diploma, then get a better job and go to night school at one of the junior colleges."

"This started out to be a good day," José said. They walked another ten blocks and came to the apartment where he lived.

Stone tapped him on the chest. "Karate and school, those are things you work out for yourself. Hell, you think you're a man, so make some adult decisions, like getting an education. As far as tonight goes, promise me that you won't be with the gang. They are going to be in deep-shit before they know it. Promise to stay home tonight?"

"Jeez, you don't give a guy much breathing room, do you?" He shuffled to the steps and back. "Damn. Okay. I sure want to learn that kick fighting. Never saw anything like it!"

At four-thirty that afternoon, Stone picked up Carol and took her to dinner. She was curious about his afternoon.

“Did some digging. The kid is fifteen years old. He’s running with a street gang that’s being used by some pusher and lab man who is making Angel Dust.”

“But, Mark, you can’t get involved. Remember what the judge said about not doing any PI work.” She frowned slightly, then reached over and touched his arm with her fingertips. “You just can’t risk it.”

Stone smiled. “Risk. I’ve been taking risks ever since I started the M.I.A. search. And besides, these bastards are pumping that junk into our streets, addicting and killing thousands, including kids. I just can’t stand by when I know where to find the scum doing it.”

“What will you do, Mark?”

“Take care of them the way they should be handled.”

After he dropped off Carol with a gentle and promising kiss, he drove back to the barrio. It took him only a half hour to find one of the small-time dealers at his corner newsstand.

Stone backed the man up against a rack of *Playboy* magazines, gripped his shirt at the chest, and twisted it.

“You get your junk from Los Hombres. They still working with Cuchillo?”

The baldheaded man’s eyes glazed. “Hey, ease up! Don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

“Maybe this will remind you,” Stone said, sliding a stiletto from his boot top and pushing the sharp blade flat against the newsstand owner’s corded neck.

“That’s cuchillo, as in *knife*.”

“Yes, yes. They talk about him in whispers, but I don’t know where he cooks.”

“You better, or you’ll need half of the Sunday paper to stuff up the slice I’m going to make across your scrawny neck!”

“No! No! Easy. I... I think I can find out. He’s up by Lancaster somewhere, in the edge of the desert. Let me make a couple of calls.”

“Sure, just so I get to listen in.”

Ten minutes later, Stone left the newsstand with a copy of *USA Today* and walked a half block to his car. He had a name and an address where the factory was. Tonight they were “cooking.” And tonight they would be out of business.

PCP is the easiest drug on the illegal market to make. The ingredients are readily available and the process is actually quite simple. That’s why police battle with hundreds of garage factories turning out PCP in almost every big town in the country.

Stone was interested in putting one such plant out of business, putting its owner in the closest funeral home. He checked his Thomas Brothers map of the Los Angeles area and soon found the spot he wanted, just north of the city near Palmdale, not Lancaster, at the edge of the desert. He pointed the Lancia in that direction and forgot there was a speed limit. Luckily no California Highway Patrol officers were watching him that time.

It was almost dark when he found the street he needed, just off Grandview Boulevard, near the edge of the small community. The street quickly became a road that led due north, straight into the desert, but still not far enough that it would touch the big Edwards Air Force Base.

The road turned off into a one-lane track, and Stone knew he couldn’t get any closer without attracting attention. He hadn’t seen much of anything for five miles.

But soon he could make out a building, maybe a mile away. Pulling to the side of the road, he turned off the engine. He would wait until dark to make his move. The desert was his kind of place after sundown, and an attack at night can be ten times more demoralizing and frightening than an obvious one-man assault in broad daylight.

He had learned that Los Hombres were small cogs in the overall operation. His street contacts had reluctantly told him that the outfit was headed by a gent called *El Lobo*, the wolf. He had contacts with some of the Mafia-connected people in the Los Angeles area, who served as buyers for out-of-town organizations.

His people told Stone that there was big money here, up to a million a week in profits, which was plenty to be able to cut in some of the local county sheriff's deputies.

Stone had parked in a small depression, so visual scanners would not show his rig as a foreign object on the screen. His latest intel about the factory told him that there would be security, armed protection, and foot patrols. He knew nothing about intrusion alarms, but he was sure that there must be some type, visual or audio.

As he waited, Stone changed into black combat pants and T-shirt with long sleeves. Then he slid into black skintight gloves, to hide his white hands, and pulled a black stocking cap down low on his forehead. He blackened the rest of his face, leaving only odd-shaped patterns for the best camouflage. By the time it was dark, Stone was ready.

From the trunk of the Lancia he took out combat webbing and snapped it on, hung on four fragger grenades, the new smooth type in dull green for HE (high explosive), and one marked as a "WP" which stood for the white phosphorous smoke it produced. It was the best little fire starter in the business.

For the night's mission he had chosen a silenced Uzi, the one with the round, thick silencer that was as long as the Uzi itself, but let the chattergun stutter out death with only a whisper. He slung it around his neck on a nylon cord, pushed a trusty .45 autoloader into his belt, and made sure his belt was in place for quick release.

His dull, polished black jump boots had sheaths built in for four, four-inch-blade throwing knives. At his belt hung a double-bladed fighting knife. One blade was honed to a hair-slicing sharpness. An eighth of an inch away was a parallel blade that held a notched bone-cutting saw blade that could rip through a rib in four seconds, and cut off an arm in half a minute.

He hefted it, getting used to the different weight of the big knife, and shoved it back in the special sheath. A tight combat pack on his back had quick openings for ready access to loaded magazines for the Uzi and the .45, as well as a variety of small surprises for the drug trade targets—if they were needed.

Stone left the Lancia locked, with the double safety switches and alarm on, then faded into the shallow ditch along the dirt track, and jogged forward into the clear desert night.

A quarter of a mile up the track, he came to a double set of barbed wire fences. The outer one was a standard four-wire cattle fence, rigged with steel posts and clips. Three feet behind it stood a second fence, six feet tall, with insulators and six strands of wire without barbs.

Twenty yards down the fence he found a sign printed and wired to the post on the second fence. *Warning, electrified fence. Do not touch. Danger!*

Danger came in all forms. If he cut the fence to penetrate, he was sure an electronic board would pinpoint his entry. There was no way to jump over both fences... but he could work under it.

Another twenty yards down the fence he found where a desert thunderstorm had deposited enough water uphill to dig a two-foot-deep ditch under the fence, in a usually dry arroyo. Stone checked both directions, found no danger, then laid on his back and pushed under the double fence without touching either of the dangerous wires.

He crawled on his hands and knees for fifty yards, moving at right angles to the fence, then came to his feet, crouching and jogging parallel to the road toward a cluster of lights ahead. His crawl should have put him past any visual or laser beam intrusion scanners aimed down the inside of the fences. Once past them, he was inside their last possible electronic defense.

He ran a hundred yards, then dropped to one knee and listened. There were only a few desert sounds: the rush of wings as an owl darted earthward after a careless mouse; the call of a night hawk; and far, far off, the lonely cry of a coyote.

All normal.

Stone brought the Uzi from his back where he had tied it, charged a round into the chamber, then pushed off the safety. This would be a damn handy time to have Terrance and the Hog working with him. He had no idea what kind of resistance he was going to find, but with a fifty-million-dollar-yearly operation, he suspected there would be some heavy duty hardasses with guns in each hand.

He hadn't decided if he would waste any of the dope dealers. If they fired, he would shoot back. It would be up to them just how far the violence went. To his mind, these men were no better than murderers.

If he could blast just one such operation, destroy it totally, he wouldn't object, if a few of the principals got wasted in the process. This was really another war! It was a war right here in the United States, and the enemy was anyone in the drug trade, from the smallest pusher right up to the importer, the manufacturer, and the slick, sleek man who laundered the huge drug profits, taking three percent.

There was a chance he could be in for a real firefight before the night was over. Stone shrugged. Hell, he'd been in a lot of fire fights before. *Yeah, but not in the U.S. of A.*

So what? A bastard poisoning kids' minds and bodies with drugs was just as bad as a Vietnamese holding a G.I. prisoner for fifteen years.

He ran another twenty yards and came to some kind of an inner defense line. These guys were set up like Fort Knox. He could see something in the moonlight: vibration sensors. They would pick up a rabbit running across the desert and radio a bleep to the monitor showing what sector had been entered. He studied the swath of sensors that glinted for a moment in the moonlight. Too wide to jump.

He found a rock and threw it as far as he could down the line of sensors, then fell flat to the ground. He heard the rock hit and a moment later lights flooded the zone where the rock had hit. Then roving spots swept back and forth over a three zone area.

The lights missed him by twenty feet. He waited ten minutes, then threw another rock in the same area. This time he found a clump of sagebrush to hide behind. The same automatic search pattern came from the lights. They had to be set up on a programmed search basis. Men with binoculars undoubtedly watched where the lights sprayed.

Five minutes later he threw another rock in the same zone. It took longer this time before the search lights came on. The fourth time he threw the rock into the area, no lights came on. Stone jumped to his feet and ran to the place he had been throwing the rocks, then hurtled across the sensor area, jangling a dozen or so.

By now the security guards would be sure that either a pack of rabbits was in the area, or their equipment was malfunctioning.

He was inside. He ran for a small outbuilding another fifty yards ahead, within twenty yards of a large building that showed lights and hummed with voices.

Silently, he edged around the small building. Behind him a gun muzzle jammed in his back.

“Now where the hell you think you’re going, dirt face?”

## Chapter 7

Before the guard finished his sentence, Stone spun around so fast the other man had no time to react, let alone pull the trigger. Stone’s left elbow, the closest part of him to the opponent, slammed into the sentry as Stone was turning, hitting his sternum, slamming him backward.

Milliseconds later, when Stone completed the spin, he swung the heavy silencer of the Uzi, smashing it into the guard’s side, splintering two ribs and dumping the man to the ground.

Stone started to stomp him, then hesitated. He could be just a hired guard service. Instead of kicking him, Stone stripped the weapon from his frozen hand, tied and gagged him, then stashed the sentry in the desert behind the small building.

Inside he found a generator humming quietly beside a muffled gasoline engine. They were so isolated here they had no electric service.

Sliding a half cube of plastic explosive C-4 from his pack, Stone attached a timer detonator and set it for thirty minutes. He placed the small bundle directly under the generator and pushed the “start” slide.

He had thirty minutes to surprise everyone.

Outside the shack, he moved silently. He checked for more roving guards, found none, and walked as if he belonged there toward the main building. Clouds had scudded over the moon, and it was desert dark.

He came to a parking lot first, and saw that it had about fifteen cars, including the two lowriders he had seen that afternoon. Of more interest were two “crew wagons,” big, black extended Cadillacs favored by the Mafia. El Lobo did have fancy connections.

He put quarter cube charges on each of the crew wagons, directly under their gas tanks, and set the detonators for twenty-five minutes. In a snake pit like this,



anyone was eligible to pay the supreme penalty for dealing in drugs. It was simply one of the facts of death.

He ran lightly to the only window he saw on this side of the barnlike aluminum structure. Through the window he saw a small room, probably an office. It had a typewriter, some file cabinets, and a desk and chairs, but no one was working there.

A strange smell suddenly wafted over him with the night breeze. He had no idea what it was, but he dropped to the ground and held his breath for thirty seconds. When it was gone, he frowned and crept around the side of the building toward the back. There he found a truck door with a small, man-sized door in one side, and a loading dock.

Stone cracked the door and looked inside. It was dark in this end of the two-hundred-foot-long building. Slowly and without making a sound, he pushed the door inward another few inches and slid through the opening.

Inside he smelled the same odor that had hit him outside. No wonder they came out here to make their PCP. He stood in the deep shadows surveying the place. Only the far end of the long building was lighted. There, along a pair of long tables, he saw people working. He counted fifteen men, no women.

A plan was slowly forming in his mind. He could wait until the charges outside went off, but he decided to act sooner. He worked his way twenty feet forward, in the unused section, positioning himself behind a stack of empty steel drums. Quickly he opened his pack and took out another quarter pound cube of C-4 plastic explosive, and broke it in half.

He taped the explosive to a new kind of detonator he had developed. It was an impact type that would explode when thrown at a wall, against a sidewalk, or even the side of a car. With the punch of plastic explosive, it was a deadly and effective impact grenade.

Now, with three of the new wave impact weapons, he moved closer. A kid from the Los Hombres gang still in his T-shirt came down a long aisle toward the dark section. He flipped on a switch and the whole area blazed with floodlights.

Stone dropped behind a pallet stacked with sacks of cement and froze. The Chicano youth took a sack of something from a stack, shouldered it, and carried it to the near end of the working table.

*More poison for the kids of Los Angeles*, Stone thought. He silently thanked the youth as he turned off the floods. Again, Stone inched forward. He didn't understand the mixing process of the chemicals to produce PCP. He didn't want to know. All he wanted to do was blow it straight into hell. He saw the near end of the table, where two large men dumped sacks into some kind of electric mixer. Other chemicals were added and eventually the drug came off the other end.

There the Los Hombres gang members stood weighing and packing the drug.

A moment later, a man in a suit came in from the outside door. He was Mexican, over six feet six, and wore a trimmed beard and moustache and an expensive blue suit. He talked to several workers on the line, then went into the office.

Only then did Stone see the three bodyguards with him. All were large and heavy. And all carried handguns under sports jackets that hadn't been designed to hide hardware.

Stone moved closer. Now he had two primary targets: the start of the mixing process and the office. He made sure the Uzi was secure on the cord around his neck, then slid past the line of darkness into the light.

He was well hidden behind stacks of cardboard boxes, but then he saw that there was a man there, bending over to pick up a sack of chemicals.

The tall man straightened up, surprised. His hand darted to his belt, but Stone kicked him in the belly and when he doubled over, Stone slammed a *mae geri keage*, front snap kick, against the side of his head. The man dropped on the sack he was about to pick up.

Stone didn't bother to tie him. By the time he came to, the fun stuff would already be underway. Quietly, Stone moved up two more rows of supplies and stores, staying out of sight. Then he found his position. Pushing the "set" trigger on the impact detonator, Stone went over his plan again.

He lifted and threw the first C-4 impact bomb at the small window in the office across the building.

He watched the missile sail, missing the window completely but hitting the thin wall and exploding with an ear-whopping roar. The one-eighth pound of C-4 was about twenty times as powerful as a hand grenade, and the wall was blasted away in a cloud of smoke and dust.

People on the work line screamed in surprise and fear.

Stone threw the second bomb, dropping it exactly into the center of the big mixing device at the start of the line. It went off on impact, shattering the metal and ripping it into shards of flying shrapnel that whizzed through the room.

Before the workers could get out of the building, he threw the third bomb, this one a WP grenade that sounded like a small firecracker. When it went off, it rained thick white smoke and sent out hundreds of burning splatters of phosphorous, a chemical that will burn through any nonmetallic substance, from cloth and paper to human flesh.

Two men screamed as the WP hit them, and they rushed outside. The WP quickly ignited boxes and wooden tables, and in only a few minutes, the inside of the warehouse was thick with smoke and flames.

On the far side, two men struggled out of the wreckage of the office. One waved a .45, but was dazed. The second man was El Lobo, himself, in his fancy blue suit. Now the coat was gone, his tie askew, and his light blue shirt smudged and torn.

Stone stood.

"El Lobo!" he bellowed.

The drug kingpin heard him through the crackle of the flames. He looked at Stone, then pointed at him and said something to the gunman beside him. The big man triggered three rounds toward Stone, but at seventy-five feet, a .45 auto is as accurate as throwing a rock.

Stone swung up the Uzi and stuttered out a six-round burst that cut the gunman in half. When he swung to the new target, El Lobo had vanished.

Around Stone the warehouse burned. He checked the side door he had programmed as his bug-out route. Now he ran to it, found it locked, and shot it open with one burst from the Uzi. Then he was outside in the fresh air. He ran to the other side of the building, passing men crawling away from the fire.

He found the door, but could see no trace of El Lobo. As he turned to search, the C-4 under the generator went off with a zapping roar and every light and protective electronic device on the site shut down.

He heard a car's engine roar into life, and just as Stone turned toward the parking lot, a limo exploded. Fiercely burning gasoline from the sixty-gallon tank sprayed down on the rest of the cars in the lot. A second Caddy limo spun its wheels away from the pyre, but had gone only twenty feet when the C-4 bomb on its gas tank went off, triggering a second gas-fume explosion that shattered the big limo into a thousand pieces.

As he watched, the supports on the roof of the aluminum structure failed and the top of it caved in. One whole wall swayed outward, then collapsed.

*Scratch one PCP manufacturing plant,* Stone thought to himself as he moved back out of the light of the burning cars. Two more had caught fire and soon their tanks exploded, showering more metal movers with burning gasoline.

The high shriek of sirens burst out of the darkness.

Stone went to the side of the building where he had last seen El Lobo. He must have left the building, but what then? Could he have been in one of the limos? Possibly, but Stone didn't think he had had the time. El Lobo must be alive and nearby.

Scanning the area in the half-light of the fire, Stone could find nothing. Just desert: rocks, a few sagebrush bushes, some raingrass, and a stick or two of manzanita and greasewood. The clouds slowly drifted away from the moon, revealing the clue he had been looking for.

A three-inch vent pipe came six inches over the top of a clump of sage. A board from the generator shack had blown off and fell in this area, unmasking the pipe. Underground!

El Lobo had a hole in the ground! Stone heard the sirens coming closer. The fire had almost burned out by now. Men wandered around the parking lot still in a daze, trying to figure out what happened to their cars.

He began stomping around the vent pipe in a circle. He started with a ten-foot-diameter circle, and then moved out three feet at a time. On the second round he hit something hollow. It took him only five minutes to uncover a trap door cleverly camouflaged. He found the hinges and the pull, then stood back and flipped the cellar-type door open.

Six submachine gun rounds jolted through the black hole. Moving swiftly, Stone jerked a fragger off his harness, pulled the pin, and dropped the grenade into the opening. The blast was muffled and only a little dust and smoke came out of the hole. It was far larger than Stone had expected.

He pulled a pencil flashlight from his pack and aimed it into the hole. No response. As the smoke cleared, he could see the bottom of the hole, with three steps going down.

He rolled over the side and landed on his hands and feet then held the pencil light to his right with his arm extended, and turned on the light.

A single shot slammed into the dirt wall beside his hand.

"Give it up, Lobo, you're one dead wolf pelt."

Another shot came but Stone had changed sides and dropped low to the dirt.

He saw the flash of the handgun and at once responded with six rounds from the Uzi. The muffled sound of the submachine gun didn't block out a sharp cry of anger and pain.

Stone tried the flashlight again, low and right this time. There was no gunfire. He moved the light around. The hole was simply that, a cave barely four feet high, with a mattress, survival gear, water, and canned food. The pipe brought in fresh air.

To the side he found El Lobo. He lay on the mattress. He was hit bad with rounds or shrapnel. Blood trickled across one cheek. The empty pistol was still clutched in his right hand.

"You lost this time," Stone said. "What are your millions going to buy you now?"

"Shut up, gringo pig!" Lobo screeched. He shuddered and grabbed his side. His hand came back blood red. "You could have been richer than you dreamed!" Lobo said. "Richer." He reached out a hand. "Help me!"

"The way you helped all those kids you poisoned? Damn right I'll help you. I'll put a slug into your skull!"

"No! Don't do that! I can still make you a rich man! I'm hurt bad, but I can live. Get me to a hospital. Close the door so they won't find us, then when everyone leaves, we get out, get to your car, and drive to this doctor I know."

Stone shone the light in his face.

"You do this and I'll give you ten million dollars."

"That is tempting, but it's dirty money, Lobo."

"It spends just the same. Save my life... and you get ten million. No taxes, no strings, no bank account."

"Cash?"

"Cash." El Lobo coughed and Stone saw him spit up blood.

"Looks like it's too late for you anyway. I'm not too wild about being found here either. Let me close the door up top and I'll be right back."

Stone went to the lighter patch of darkness, and peered out at the former PCP plant. Only a few flames showed. A police car with a blinking light had pulled in and various people were handcuffed. The cop talked on his radio, probably asking for a bus and more help.

Softly, Stone closed the door and hoped it looked all right on top. He went back to check on El Lobo.

The drug king had slumped on the mattress, clutching his side and staring weakly at Stone.

"No damn time!" he wheezed. "No damn... time." A moment later, he wheezed and died.

Stone was relieved for a moment. He didn't have to make a decision. He had been thinking of all the good he could do with ten million dollars. He could open drug rehab clinics, he could get a drug education project going in schools, maybe nationwide. Now he didn't have to worry about the ethics of the decision.

He looked around and found two candles, lit them, and checked out the rest of the little cave. It was about eight feet square and four feet high. In some stacks of boxes in the corner he found a round oatmeal box stuffed full of bills, mostly fifties and hundreds. The money was not banded or bundled, just stuffed in there. He set it aside.

An hour later he had taken everything apart in the cave but had not found any big amount of cash. "No strings, no bank," was the way El Lobo had put it.

Stone stared at the dead man a long time and noticed how his hands were gripping the mattress as if he didn't want to leave life... or leave the mattress.

He cut open the end of the mattress and between the quilted layer and the inside springs, he found the cash. There lay a blanket of neatly bundled and banded stacks of currency. Most were about an inch thick. He wondered if the whole mattress was covered with the money.

He looked at the stacks. Many were fifties, with a few hundreds and a lot of tens and twenties. Ten million? Probably not. But certainly more cash than Stone had ever seen. The problem pounded back at him. The ethics of dirty money. He could never return it to those who had snorted, shot up, and drugged away their lives.

Without further thought, he took off his pack and wedged the oatmeal box filled with cash into the canvas confines. It would be a start. For several seconds he stared at El Lobo's body. Then he checked out the trap door. Two more police cars had arrived. Spotlights and a stream light were being used. As he watched, an ambulance came whining to a halt.

He moved El Lobo's body to the edge of the stairs, then checked again and hoisted the dead man onto the steps. Stone blew out the candles, then slowly and with no sound, he opened the dugout door. Carrying El Lobo's body thirty yards toward the burned-out shell, he slipped quietly back into the cave.

He grabbed his pack and checked around. Then he closed up the mattress and covered it with a blanket. After one last look, he slipped out the trap door, lowered it in place, and made sure that he left no tracks in the area.

Then he jogged south toward the fence where he had left his car. The police would find El Lobo's body in the morning, and probably a few others in the ashes. That would be their problem. The money in that cave was his problem. Did he want it? What would he do with it? How could he utilize it? He couldn't even put it in a bank—not more than \$9,999 at a time anyway.

He'd worry about the money later. The cash might not even be there by the time he went back to look for it. The police might find it, or the land might be dug up and the cave filled in. There were a dozen things that could happen.

Right now his job was to get out of the area so there could be no way to tie him with the hit. It would be dark for a few hours yet—plenty of time to take off his camo black and drive out of the desert, back to Los Angeles.

Stone went over the fence and jogged the half mile to his car. Shifting into gear, he drove sedately back to the road, then headed south at thirty miles an hour. It wasn't until he was two miles away that he could relax.

He thought for a moment about José Ortega. He would try to see the boy tomorrow. Los Hombres would be short a few members.

He nodded to himself. What he did tonight had been a departure from his M.I.A. hunting, but fully justified. Someday soon he might consider tapering off his M.I.A. work and looking at some of the injustices in his own back yard that needed cleaning up. The drug trade would be one place to start.

Slanting through Palmdale, he hit the roadway south.

## Chapter 8

Stone turned on Highway Fourteen and headed for San Fernando. No one seemed to be tailing him. He pulled into a roadside restaurant for five minutes, but saw nothing unusual. No one following.

By the time he got back to Carol's motel room, it was nearly ten-thirty. He checked her out of the motel and moved her into his Venice house, where he found mail and dishes he hadn't washed before he left for Laos... about two months ago...

Carol laughed at him, shook her head, and put the scrungy dishes to soak. Then they cleaned the sour milk and various inedibles out of the refrigerator. There was nothing new in the mail.

"We better enjoy this place while we can. I don't see any way that I can go to trial on those charges. If David can't get them reduced or thrown out, we'll have to skip out on the bail, then there goes the old homestead."

She shushed him, sat him on the sofa and turned on the stereo. Then Carol flipped through his records in mock honor.

"No Madonna? No Boss? Not even an old Beatles album?"

"Well, buy me some new records, if you don't like the selection."

He pulled her down on the sofa, opened his combat pack, and took out the round, cardboard oatmeal box with the picture of the Quaker man on the front.

"What's this? You want some cooked oatmeal?"

"Look inside."

She took off the cardboard top and stared in amazement. "Oh... my!" She looked up at him. "Is it real?"

"As real as Uncle Sam can make it. Just paper, of course, but paper that in the economic reality of this culture can be bartered for almost any commodity that is desired."

"I never make jokes about money, Stone. Look at all of this money!"

"Why don't you count it?"

"I'll need help."

They moved the newspapers and mail off the coffee table and began sorting the bills by denominations. Near the top of the box the bills were mostly fifties and hundreds, but as they went lower they found wads of fives and tens. No ones.

"Just exactly what is this and where did it come from?"

"It's money and I stole it."

"It's cash greenbacks all right. Now tell me about your little discussion with José Ortega's friends, and where this money came from," Carol demanded.

He told her.

"At least one PCP plant is out of business," she nodded slowly. "This El Lobo, he died?"

"Yes, in a hideout cave he had built and camouflaged." He did not tell her about the mattress of money. Not yet. They had the bills all sorted into piles.

"I worked my way through college as a bank teller, let me count." She did quickly, even turning the bills so they all faced one way and the same side up, as a teller would.

The job took her twenty minutes and she made notes on a pad of paper as she went. At last she sat back.

"I don't believe it. In that little box were sixty one-hundred dollar bills, a hundred and forty fifties, and four hundred and twenty-three twenties. Then I found three hundred and fifteen tens and six hundred and twenty-seven fives. That's a total of twenty-seven thousand, seven hundred and forty-five dollars!"

"It's drug money. They deal in cash only. No credit cards. Which means the big dealers and wholesalers have cash stuffed all over their places. Even the importers and makers, like El Lobo, deal in cash. Some of it like this they don't get around to counting right away."

"It's dirty money."

"True, but do you want to give it back? To who? The dopers? No. We have to decide what to do with it."

"We could put it in a church poor box."

"True, Carol, or we could buy a ten-dollar food gift certificate from McDonald's for every bum and wino on the street."

"Maybe a drug clinic? Methadone? A special grant to the Narc Squad at L.A.P.D.?"

"We've got some time to decide about that. How much more vacation do you have?"

"Another four days."

"Good. Right now it's time for a midnight swim in the calm, warm Pacific Ocean lapping at our front door. Then we'll talk about the rest of your vacation."

"But I... I didn't bring a swimsuit."

"Good," Stone said. "It's dark, wear a robe to the water's edge."

She watched him and slowly a smile spread across her perfect face. Her soft blue eyes sparkled and she wrinkled up her nose. "I'll go skinny dipping, if you will."

"You're on."

The Venice beach is not exactly like the deserted stretches of beaches above Santa Barbara. There are always a few people walking the shore late at night. But nobody seemed to notice or to mind the pair of tall, slender figures that shucked off robes and dashed into the Pacific in the buff. They splashed and swam in the moonlight, catching a few waves for body surfing. They came back to their robes shivering and ran quickly into the beachfront house.

After a long, warm shower, they dried each other and drank coffee and hot chocolate in front of a crackling fire.

"Tomorrow we bank that cash..." She stopped. "Oh, damn, no, we can't. On anything more than ten thousand, you have to file a special form with the government. They get curious about big amounts of cash."

"As they should. I'll put nine thousand in my personal account and later another nine thousand in my business account and we'll keep the rest for contingency expenses." He held up his hands. "I know, I know. It's dirty money. But if we can do some good with it, that might make it cleaner, right?"

"Yes. Then tomorrow we'll talk to your lawyer and see what he can do. Most of those charges seem ridiculous."

“They are, and not within the jurisdiction of the court. I think the CIA, the U.S. Attorney, and the judge all know it. It’s a delay, a harassing technique.”

“Good. I’d just die if you lost this place.”

Stone nodded. “Tomorrow we go down to the office of Stone Investigative Consultants, where I used to be a private investigator.”

“How can you get your license back?”

“Get these charges withdrawn or beat them in a trial, but that’s not as important as they thought. The company can still do business. I’ve got one man down there with his own license. I can work under him. You don’t have to have a license to work for a private investigator who does have his license.”

Carol grinned. “Now that is what I call pulling a switch on the U.S. Attorney and the CIA!”

“We have a month before that first preliminary hearing. As far as I know, there’s no other M.I.A. client on the boards. We’re not getting nearly as many inquiries as we did for a while. I’m afraid a lot of our guys still over there have died. Damn it! We just couldn’t get to all of them.”

She blinked and he held her tightly. “Sweetheart! Carol, I’m sorry—I didn’t mean your brother. We both agreed a long time ago that most of the M.I.A. s listed in ’Nam were really killed in action. The military uses the M.I.A. tag for anybody who they can’t absolutely confirm as being dead.”

“I know, but the M.I.A. label is just something that gives us a flicker of hope.” She wiped her eyes. “I know that the chances of Billy coming home now are almost nonexistent. Still we can hope.”

“There’s always hope, Carol.”

“Do you still have that bottle of wine I left for you the last time I was here?”

He found it and some crackers and cheese. When the wine bottle was empty, they went to bed.

For the next week, Stone spent half of his time in his lawyer’s office, getting his PI license restored and his business running smoothly. He had a routine surveillance job on one of Hollywood’s better-known directors, commissioned by the man’s wife, and a missing person problem that had his whole operation stumped.

Carol had returned home to Washington. She said there was no chance of getting transferred to L.A., not with her new promotion in the Defense Department. The tears flowed at the flight gate, and suddenly she was gone. She promised to be on the lookout for any M.I.A. notices that she could find.

It was two weeks after they had walked out of a federal courthouse that David Barkham called him at the Stone Investigative Consultants office.

“Well, we have some good news, Stone.”

“I could use some.”

“A different federal judge just ruled on my motion. The case was on for a pre-trial hearing, and the judge had a good laugh. He said the U.S. Attorney should be arrested. Basically he said the only part of the indictment that would hold up was the part about traveling in a country where travel was prohibited.”

“Big deal.”



“Exactly. He said such a charge was not a felony or a misdemeanor, and should be handled *internally* by the branch of the government which issued the passport, usually the State Department.”

“About time. All of this means?”

“You and your two friends have your passports back, you have your state PI license back, and your bail money and guarantees have been returned to the bail bondsman.”

“Now that *is* good news,” Stone agreed.

After they hung up, Stone looked up the number of the Soldier of Fortune bar and dialed it. He got the owner on the line and asked about Hog and Loughlin.

“Yeah, I got them listed. Who’s asking?”

“Mark Stone.”

“Yeah, you’re on the list for info. Both gents are out of town on a job.”

“Where? I’ve got some news for them.”

“Can’t say.”

“Can’t, Duffy, or won’t?”

“Both. You want any contact, you come and show your face and I check it out. Then, maybe.”

“Forget it, Duff, the news is good. It can wait.”

Stone hung up.

He hadn’t felt so good since he saw those last four M.I.A.s he’d rescued on television where they had lied like troopers and said they “escaped” by themselves into Thailand, just the way the CIA agents had told them to tell it. It was that, or no back military pay. Commander Farley Anderson had more than four hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars coming from the U.S. Navy in back pay!

Stone didn’t mind the anonymity. He demanded it. His name or those of his men never surfaced in the press. The CIA knew all about them. Coleman especially. But they could do little except make threats and pressure him.

He would get a check from each of the former M.I.A.s later, he knew. He told them about what each operation cost, and told them they could pay a share of it if they wished. He had never had a single rescued M.I.A. forget to send his share.

Stone never made back his expenses on the M.I.A. operations, but he had his PI work to help take up the slack. Lately, the man running things, Ben Zedicher, had been developing into an expert PI—and a good businessman as well.

He looked around the office. Four consulting rooms, much like his own, each twelve feet square and set up like a cozy living room with a small desk against the far wall.

A couch and easy chair held the center of attention. There was Ben running things, two unlicensed investigators, and Kathy, the secretary. He would be relying more and more on them in the future.

At that moment, Stone had no M.I.A. leads at all. That was unusual. Often he had two or three that he was tracking down and trying to confirm. He only went after an M.I.A. when he had at least two sources that said there was a specific individual, at a specific location, on a specific date.

He thought of fishing. He hadn’t been out on a half-day sport fishing boat in a year. But he had missed the afternoon run. Maybe tomorrow. He’d get his poles out and oil the reels and check the papers to see if the surface fish were running.

Maybe the albacore tuna would be coming in about now, twelve to fifty pounders would be about right.

He told Kathy he was going out to his Venice place if she needed him. She checked her small notice board.

“Oh, Mr. Stone, there was a call from a man who wouldn’t leave his number. He said he was moving around a lot, but wanted to talk to you as soon as possible. He said it had to do with the China Connection. What does that mean?”

“The China Connection?” Stone shook his head. “I have no idea. Try to get a name if he calls again.”

“I asked him that, but he said his name would mean nothing to you.”

“A mystery. Just what I need.” Stone waved and went down to his Lancia and drove toward Venice. He would beat the late afternoon traffic, but not by much.

Venice is a casual, laid-back beach community; the hippies and beatniks loved it. But then the drug trade moved in with a vengeance. You could get almost any kind of drugs you wanted on any one of a dozen street corners.

Stone hit the beeper from the glove compartment and opened the garage door, then hit it again to close the door and turn on the garage light. Actually Stone realized he had to punch the beeper a second time to close the door but thinking back he knew there was not much delay between his getting parked in the narrow garage and the door coming down.

That was partly why he was so surprised when he stepped out of his Lancia and found a man bleeding to death beside the front fender.

Stone saw the man’s face and the slash across his cheek. He had never seen him before. Kneeling on the concrete floor, Stone held the man’s head. His chest was a mass of blood. One hand tried to hold his guts inside his slashed belly.

His rich brown eyes blinked open, and his voice came only as a hoarse whisper.

“Stone?”

“Yeah, buddy, take it easy. You got cut up bad. Let me get some disinfectant and some roller bandages. You’re leaking all over the floor.”

“No time,” the wounded man said. He coughed and Stone knew the sound—his lungs were filling with blood. The man looked at Stone and caught his hand. His eyes rolled up and he shivered, his eyes slowly focusing on Stone.

“Rosalyn, a... alive in...”

The man struggling to keep death away sighed, and his eyes closed, then snapped open. He tried to say something else but it was only a gurgle. Blood ran freely from out of his mouth and nose. With no warning his head rolled back off Stone’s knee.

He was dead.

There was no reason for Stone to check his pulse. The combat veteran and line crosser had seen more than his share of men die. He could tell.

Death is always a shock, especially when it’s close up and in person. Stone gently laid the man’s head on the concrete garage floor and scowled.

Then he remembered what the man had said: “*Rosalyn, alive in...*”

Stone took a deep breath to steady himself. He knew only one Rosalyn, had never even met another in his life. The only Rosalyn he knew had been in ‘Nam. An Army nurse. A first lieutenant. The greatest love of his life...

He slumped on the floor thinking back, thinking about 'Nam and the bad times. And the day he met Rosalyn. It was so long ago, and for thirteen years he thought she was dead.

*Now this... Rosalyn—alive! Was it true?*

The man had come looking for Stone. Who was he? Stone's mind whirled back to the jungles of Southeast Asia, back to the sweat and dampness, the snakes, the bugs, the raids. The wounded and the dying—and the dead.

Rosalyn James was dead.

The chopper pilot had been killed. The whole crew had died in that dust-off chopper that had taken massive ground fire, lost an oil line, and, for want of a gallon of fuel spewed over the jungle, the bird had dropped like a stone. Down and dead. Rosalyn James was dead.

But the man said she was alive! *Was it possible?* No. She had to be dead.

Then he was back in 'Nam and nothing could pull him away from it.

## Chapter 9

### ***Da Nang, Vietnam. 1974.***

Da Nang was secure in those days—as secure as any city in 'Nam ever was, which meant about 40/60 in favor of the other side. But inside the big base there was some feeling of safety. Especially in the hospital where Sgt. Mark Stone saw Rosalyn for the first time.

He was coming out of the anesthetic, feeling crazy drunk and wanting to throw up and make love at the same time. Altogether, goofy, wild, and sick.

“Wake up, soldier! Come on, you've had a nice long nap and now it's time to get back with it. Don't you know there's a war going on?”

She was all a blur. He knew she had to be a nurse, but he couldn't make her out yet.

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbled.

“Hey, this shot-up bag of bones can talk! How about that. He might live yet.”

“Damn well better,” Stone growled. He could see her then, pert and saucy, breasts surging against the white uniform, waist tucked in and tiny, short brown hair and gray-green eyes that laughed at him despite her concern.

Her voice was soft and lower than most women's, but with a touch of whiskey that made it sound a little breathless, the kind actresses work at perfecting. She already had it. She had damn near everything from what he could see.

“No!” her voice came as sharp and stinging as a top drill instructor's with a raw recruit.

“Don't try to sit up, soldier.” She looked at the chart. “Sergeant, *please* be careful. You've just had surgery, and all of those neat stitches could pull out and you'd fall apart.”

The pain hit him and he grunted as he eased back on the bed.

“How's the room service in this hotel?”

“You’re feeling better.” She checked his chart again. “Sergeant Stone, I bet you’re a hard man. But in here you’re just another patch-up job.” She said it, but her heart wasn’t in the words. His gaze met hers and the sham toughness that went with her job fell away.

She was suddenly a little girl, vulnerable, soft, unsure.

A gurney rolled by outside the room and the sound broke the spell. But he had seen right into her soul and he would never forget it.

He motioned to her. She stepped from the end of the bed up beside him.

“Yes, Sergeant Stone?” She seemed to relish saying his name.

“Secret, lean down.” When she did he kissed her cheek. “I make it a point always to kiss the angel who saves my life. Congratulations, you were just promoted from First Jane to Angel. Not a bad rank.” He frowned, the reaction to the medication came, and he closed his eyes. Before he knew it, he was woozy, then fast asleep.

Lt. Rosalyn James smiled, checked his pulse at his wrist and made a note on his chart.

A nurse with captain’s bars on her collar came down the ward.

“James, why are you still here? Your shift ended an hour ago.”

“Just had to make sure one of the men woke up after he came out of surgery. The post-op was full.”

The captain smiled. “Which one?”

“Sergeant Stone.”

The nurse who had been in the Army for almost twenty years looked at the young man on the bed and grinned. “You do know how to pick your shots, Lieutenant.” Then she frowned. “Remember, he’s an enlisted man.”

A week later Ros and Stone were spending every free moment together. He was still recuperating, but the second week he was told he should be walking. Rosalyn was there to help him take his first steps. She brushed the wetness from his eyes and told him it was perfectly all right for a man to cry. She knew how those muscles and tendons could start growing together.

They moved from his wheelchair to a bench against the wall of the hospital. It took longer than Stone ever thought possible. But with the firm right hand of Lt. James holding his arm, he made it. They eased to the bench and her face beamed with pride.

“I knew you could make it! Now every step will be easier.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “That’s a little bonus,” she said, her face suddenly coloring.

Again she was the little girl, shy and uncomplicated. He caught her chin with his hand and turned her face to him. “I’d like a try at that bonus again.” Before she could say yes or no, he kissed her soft lips, an easy kiss that grew more insistent and then he pulled away before she wanted him to.

“Oh, my!” Rosalyn said softly.

“That was nice,” Stone said. “I’m going to need more of those bonuses to keep walking.”

Lt. James moved back and patted her shining hair. “Sergeant Stone! That was not—I mean—you *could* have asked.”

He grinned. “You would have said yes. So I figured, why waste time? Next time I’ll ask.”

A week later he was moved out of the hospital and assigned to a physical therapy unit, where he reported twice a day for prescribed exercises to strengthen his cut-up muscles and get him back in fighting shape.

Every night he met Rosalyn in the snack bar at the hospital. He was still in his hospital blues and wore no insignia or rank. He knew that was one of the reasons she could be seen with him in public. As long as they didn't flaunt it. He had known two enlisted men who had dated nurses and married them as soon as they got stateside.

He quickly learned everything he could about her. Rosalyn Anne James was from Chicago where her father had worked in a factory for twenty years. Her mother was a part-time bookkeeper. She had two older brothers, a younger sister, and she was a Catholic.

She had wanted to be a ballet dancer until she was fourteen. Then she concentrated on her second choice, her adult choice, to be a nurse. Now she wished she had held out to be a doctor, but med school costs were out of the question.

She walked with him to the rehab barracks each night, because it was darker around it, and they could stand in the shadows, hold each other, and kiss and whisper their dreams.

"Why don't you apply for special med school training through the Army? They have a program where you can go to school and the army pays. Then when you get out, you serve six years or something like that."

"I'm twenty-three already, and I only have two years of college. And I'm a woman. They'd never take a woman."

After two weeks he had convinced her to try, and together they filled out the forms.

A week later he was released from physical therapy and cleared to go back to his outfit, a recon unit on the outskirts of Da Nang. He had two days before he had to report. Rosalyn took a two-day pass and they met in a small hotel where they never asked questions.

They had been two of the best days of his life.

"Is this what marriage is like?" he asked her on the last morning.

"Partly. This is the best of it. Then there are the bills and decisions, and a job or two jobs and babies, and a dog... I think I'd like to try it... with you."

She watched him. "For God's sake say something! I've never asked a guy to marry me before!"

"I've never accepted a proposal before," he said, and kissed her. "It was what a lawyer would call a leading question, and you walked right into the trap."

"Nice trap." She was serious for a minute. "Hey, don't you go and get yourself shot up again out there. We've got plans."

"Not until we get rotated and your hitch is up, or you get into med school through the army. Any news?"

She bit her lip and looked away. "I promised myself I wouldn't lie to you. There is some news."

"Damn it to hell!"

"About what they said. My commanding officer, Colonel Martha Jefferson, would not approve my application or forward it. She said, why prolong the agony? Two

other nurses had tried it, both had been slapped down hard. She said she was being kind to me.”

“You should have slapped her down.”

“And been in the stockade for ten years? No thanks.” She wiped tears away. “So I’m a nurse! You want to put me through med school?”

“Damn right. I’ll rob banks if I have to. That’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get. Two more years of pre-med college, and then four years of med school. When is your hitch up?”

They planned for the rest of their time together, then took a cyclo, a vehicle similar to a pedal rickshaw, back to the hospital. He kissed her at the nurse’s entrance, then went to the depo, where he caught a ride back to his unit.

Three days later he got a letter saying that she had volunteered for medevac duty, where they flew into combat zones to pick up the wounded. In certain areas they would allow nurses to go along on the pick-up on special emergency cases and bring them to the hospital. It usually was a regimental aid station where the casualties were often brought first.

*I know there will be some danger, she wrote. The choppers have to fly over enemy-held territory sometimes, but we have been losing too many boys because there were no medical people on hand. They have refused to let the doctors fly the birds, so the more experienced nurses have been given the opportunity. I’ll get flight pay, which’ll help with tuition later on. I know you’ll understand.*

*I just hope and pray that you’re never one of the casualties I come to get.*

*I talked to another nurse today who said it would have been a million-to-one for a nurse to ever get admitted into that army schooling program. They did most of it in WWII.*

*At least we tried.*

*Hey, you be careful. Keep your butt down out there and don’t take any chances. You’re staying safe for three now. Listen. No, I’m not pregnant. But I will want to be some day, so we’re just thinking ahead. I might even specialize in obstetrics, and I’ll want to have some experience. Give me a better rapport with the ladies-in-waiting.*

*You be good, and call me next time you get a leave. Try to wangle one soon, even a day trip into the city.*

*Love you—Ros*

Stone had a week-long mission just after he got the letter. He and two men had to go twenty miles inland and north to capture a particularly dangerous North Vietnamese general. They brought him back bound and gagged.

Stone was in Da Nang the next day on the phone to the nurse’s quarters. It took him two hours to get her on the phone.

“Mark! Are you on leave?”

“For the day. You have to quit taking those air evacs.”

“Darling, I can’t. I’ve only been on six and I signed up for twenty-five. Sometimes we have two a day. So far we haven’t even been shot at. It’ll be over in no time.”

“When are you off duty?”

“Now.”

“We have to talk.”

“Where? You’ll be in uniform.”

“Right. Not the hospital. The hotel—our favorite hotel. Remember they have a little restaurant in there. Half an hour?”

“I’ll be there, darling. I’m sorry you’re worried.”

She came right on time. They sat in a back booth shielded by a planter.

He stood and kissed her. “I’ve missed you, Ros. God, how I’ve missed you!”

“I knew you were on a mission. I don’t want to know about it. I’d be more petrified than I already am. I worry about you so much.”

“A year from now we’ll be rotated. Your time will be up. I’ve been here plenty long. Then we can laugh at all this. But now it’s the damn most important thing in my life!”

“I know. Me too. But I have to do the rest of the flights. There simply is no way out of it. They’ve already had to curtail some of the flights because nobody would go. I know we could have saved two or three of the men we got if we’d been with them on the bird. I can’t sit back here and wait for them to come in. I know you understand. It’s the same as the time you dragged your buddy half a mile to get him behind lines.”

Stone shook his head. “I should have known better than to try to talk you out of it. You’ll be able to talk your way into any medical school you want, and then walk your way through.”

“Thanks, darling.” She smiled softly and her face colored. “I checked and our old room is available. Would you like to take another look at our view?”

“Our window looks at the back of a brick building!”

“You remembered!”

When they parted that evening, Stone kissed her gently at the side door of the hotel, then hurried out without looking back. If he looked back he might never have strength enough to leave her. That was the last time he saw her, March 14, 1974.

Ros watched him walk away, tears glistening in her eyes. She checked her watch. She had an hour to get to the medevac station. There was no point in telling Mark that she was subbing for another nurse tonight.

They hadn’t been on any night evacs, but there was always a chance one would come through. She hurried to the street, caught a cyclo, and rode back to the hospital.

There was no call that night, but the next day Lt. Rosalyn James took her seventh medevac flight. They had to sweep about twenty miles north, then inland. There were four seriously wounded boys who would need care on the way back.

The Bell UH-1D chopper lifted high off the jungle on the first half of the trip. The hope was to get out of range of the rifles and machine guns below.

Ros sat on the floor of the big chopper, her arms crossed as she watched out the open door. The jungle shifted below them. She had heard no shots so far. Maybe she would be lucky again.

The pilot announced they were coming down. It all seemed so fast to her. Then they settled softly to the ground. Marines materialized at the LZ and carried four buddies on board. They strapped them in litters and Ros went to work. She gave

one man blood, and was helping another to breathe as they took off. She monitored the third man, and as she came to the last one she saw that it was already too late for him.

She went back to the first with tears in her eyes. He looked up at her, and she knew he couldn't be more than seventeen. His skin was sallow from loss of blood, and she touched his forehead gently. He looked at her.

"Lieutenant, we gonna make it out of here, ma'am?"

"You bet we are, soldier! Damn right we are! Hell, we're too mean to die! You just hang on and we'll have you in a nice white hospital bed in Da Nang before you know it."

That was when the first burst of ground fire slammed through the chopper. The pilot yelled in pain. The second Marine on the stretcher, who was breathing raggedly, took a round through his back and out his chest. He died instantly.

A dozen more rifle rounds hit the chopper, some penetrating, some slanting off it. Then the machine gun caught their range again and the heavy slugs tore through the light aluminum skin of the chopper. The pilot screamed again.

"Hang on, I've lost oil pressure! Try to set her down soft, but I don't think I can. Grab something solid and hold on!"

His voice came again a moment later. It was calmer. As if he knew what was going to happen.

"We're about fifty feet over the second canopy. We're going to hit damn hard. Pray if you know how. God, now is the time to pray!"

Ros looked out the open door and saw tree tops slashing past the chopper. Then the blades hit something and the bird pivoted, slewing on its side, and Ros remembered she had forgotten to hold on to anything.

Before she knew it, she slid out the chopper door, crashing through the tops of the trees.

"I'm dead!" she kept telling herself. "I'm dead and I'll never see Mark Stone again!" That was when she hated the war and everything about it. She hated the war for killing her and not letting her have her life to live with Mark Stone back in the States.

Just after she screamed, the world turned to inky blackness and there was more black on black on black on black. Then there was nothing at all...

## Chapter 10

Stone had no idea how long he sat there on the cold concrete of his garage floor. A buzzing fly brought him back to reality. Then he saw a dozen flies lighting on the dead man's bloody face and chest.

Dead man?

Yeah, a corpse in his garage. The man must have waited in the bushes and rushed around the corner and into the building as Stone drove inside, before he closed the door.

Why?



Why did he use his dying breath to tell Mark Stone, a man he had never seen, the name of a long-dead woman whom he said was alive? Who was the dead man? Stone moved, legs aching with the effort after being in one position for so long.

The man's billfold had over three hundred dollars in it, twenties and fifties. All legal tender.

There were no credit cards, no business cards, nothing at all with a name and address on it. Not even a driver's license. You couldn't exist in California without a driver's license.

Who the hell was he?

Stone checked the body. Two shots in the back, with rounds that had punched through the thick body and exploded out his chest. Large-caliber weapon. Two knife slashes, one on the cheek, another on the upper torso. Both messy, but neither one killed him. They had come first, an hour or so before the man died.

Stone needed a body bag. He settled for an old Army blanket. He spread it in the Lancia's trunk, then hoisted the body onto the blanket. There was time yet to bend the legs before they stiffened. At least there'd be no more blood. When the heart stops pumping, blood stops pulsing out of wounds. What is left in the body drains to the lowest levels, where gravity takes it.

He went inside his kitchen and brought back a pan of cold water, a bucket, and two heavy washcloths. The blood came off the concrete easily—except for the little that had soaked into the semiporous surface. He could use alcohol on it later, but there would always be a stain there to remind him where the nameless man had died.

After putting away the cleaning gear, he washed his hands and then drove into an alley a mile from his house. He kept the lights off for the last three blocks, ducked into the alley, and spilled the body and the Army blanket out of his trunk and then drove slowly out of the alley and another three blocks before he switched on his lights.

Back in his beachfront house, he checked the answering machine, but there had been no calls. He phoned his secretary's home number and told Kathy to be at work at six a.m. They had a lot of calling to do back east.

Stone slid a Beretta .92 DA automatic in his shoulder leather and went for a walk. He strolled along the beach, down past the next two streets for about a half mile. He was watching for anything that looked out of place. Someone sitting in a car watching, a casual lookout somewhere checking the sidewalks.

There could be someone out there still looking for the dead man, wondering if he had died or if he still was wandering about. Stone saw nothing to alert him and made certain no one was following him.

Back at his house he locked the doors, turned on the intrusion alarms, and had a quick shower before he dove into bed. Wheels within wheels kept turning until he drifted to sleep.

The next morning at five o'clock, Stone listened to KNX, an all-news radio station. The third story was about a body found in Venice.

"Police said they had little to go on. The dead man's wallet held more than three hundred dollars but no identification. He is described by police as about five feet

eleven, a hundred and eight-five pounds, a full head of dark hair, and a scar on his right cheek.

“His age is estimated at forty-seven or forty-eight years old. His shoes were the only identifiable item of clothing. They were made in Taipei, and were probably purchased in Hawaii, the closest outlet for that brand.

“Police are asking anyone who may have knowledge of the man and his identity to contact the Los Angeles Police Department.”

Stone had memorized the vitals as they were given. Now he finished shaving and dressed, had a cup of coffee, and headed for his office in North Hollywood.

If he gunned it, he could beat the morning rush traffic.

Kathy waited for him in the office looking sleepy and grumpy. He sent her across the street for donuts and fresh coffee.

Then they began. It was six-fifteen when Kathy buzzed him that she had Miss Jenner on the wire from the Department of Defense.

“Emergency, Carol. I’ve got a problem.” Quickly he told her about the dead man, but not the message. He gave her the man’s vital statistics, and she stopped him.

“No name?”

“That’s what I want you to find, who he is and what he is and where he worked. He could be Army Intelligence, CIA, or maybe even a diplomat. Check it out. L.A.P.D. has the data on him and the body.”

“Impossible. There’s no way I can ID him for you without more facts.”

“All we have. I’m digging more right now, so I’ve got to go. Keep in touch. I need everything you have in three hours.”

His next call went to Captain Art England of the L.A.P.D., a specialist in homicide whom Stone figured would be on the job. Stone had known him a couple of years ago on a case he got mixed up in as a PI.

“Art? Mark Stone here. Figured you’d be at work. I was on my way to catch the early sport boat when I heard about that Venice body. If you haven’t got an ID yet, I may have an idea.”

“Christ Stone, you get your license jerked away and slammed back so fast these days, it’s hard to tell if you’re legal. At least you’re a tax-paying citizen. We got nothing.”

“Sounds like a guy I bumped into in Bangkok once, from what I heard on the air this morning. Might be in left field, but if I had a picture of the guy ...”

“Not a chance. We don’t give out pictures of stiffes for any reason. If we did, it would be in the paper for big ID play. We may just have to write this one off.”

“Natural causes, I’d say. That’s why you’re on it.”

“Funny, Stone. Two slammers we figure were .45s from about six feet, just enough to avoid powder burns.”

“The head?”

“No, in the heart—from the back, no less. Now quit pumping. What’s the name of this guy in Bangkok you used to know?”

“Oh, I never had a whole name, just a last one. Shattenkirk. Strange name. He was either with the State Department or a spook, I never did find out. Probably not the same guy at all.”

“A spook? You think he might have been CIA?”

“The agency has men all over Bangkok, but I wasn’t sure this Shattenkirk was a spook. He might have been.”

“What’s your piece of this pie?”

“What? I’m just an interested citizen trying to do my civic duty.”

“Yeah, and I’m Little Bo Peep. Anyway, we’ll check it out. We’ve got some sharp FBI guys here who could forward a picture. Yeah, Stone, we do take record pictures. Now I got another call. Anything shows, I’ll buzz you. Over and out, gumshoe.”

Kathy, looking almost awake, came to his door. She munched on a jelly donut and sipped her coffee. “What now, Mr. Stone?”

“You ever go fishing, Kathy?”

“Not really. I went out on a lake once with my father. He fished, I watched.”

“Fishing is putting out the bait and hoping that something grabs it. Right now we’re waiting for somebody to take the bait.”

“May I take a nap while we wait?”

“Pick a couch, anywhere,” he said. “Switch over the phones so both lines ring in here.”

Stone put his feet up on his desk and watched the city come to life around him.

An hour after Stone called the L.A.P.D., his phone jangled.

“Stone here.”

“Captain England. Do I have to come out and pick you up or are you coming in?”

“Why? Breakfast or lunch?”

“Wise ass, this is heavy. I called an FBI man I know, and he slammed over here in ten minutes, put a picture on one of those machines, and had a confirmation back a half hour later. The man is CIA, and he had been missing in our city for the past two days. He flushed his check-in with the FBI. Supposed to be passing through.”

“Was it Shattenkirk?”

“Hell, no. Guy’s name was Pete Garrick, for all the good it does. The FBI picked up the body ten minutes ago. It’s washed out of our hands.”

“So if it’s gone, why your sweat?”

“I’m interested in your tip. How in hell did you know the guy was CIA?”

“A hunch. Check my passport, I have been to Bangkok a few times in the past two years.”

“I never buy a coincidence.”

“Deduction. I’m a PI right? That’s my business. No ID on him, not even laundry marks. No ID in his billfold. No credit cards. Who lives without a credit card or two? And no driver’s license. You ever tried to cash a check in this town without a driver’s license *and* one major credit card?”

“Possible.” The line was silent. “Not a damn thing I can charge you with. You kill him?”

“I don’t like backshooting.”

“Yeah. Okay, forget it. But you owe me a lunch. I figure you just used me, buddy. I don’t know how or why, but I’ve been pulled through a knot hole and you got what you wanted. The next time you owe me, right?”

“Right, Captain. By then you’ll be chief. I’ve got to go. Good talking with you.”

He hung up and stared at the dial, then at Kathy who was still sleeping on his sofa. At least she didn't snore.

He dialed the Washington, D.C. number and heard Carol's sweet voice.

"We've got a name. Pete Garrick, CIA field agent. See if you can find his last duty station and why he was pulled out. Somebody caught up with him here and dusted him. Oh, Carol, this is important."

Then he told her about Rosalyn James.

"The other woman," she said softly.

"No, the *before* woman everyone said was dead. She may not be. I have to find out where she is, and *if* she is."

"I understand. I'll do my best. I respect you too much to do anything else. Let me make some calls. Don't go out for lunch."

She broke the connection.

Stone nodded and put down the phone. He made new coffee at the hot water machine and held it under Kathy's sleepy nose. She came awake and grabbed the mug.

"You have breakfast?" he asked. She shook her head. "Watch the phones and I'll go get us something. You like French toast?"

"Yes."

"Be right back."

The French toast was three large slabs of white Italian bread cooked to a brown turn, lathered with butter and hot maple syrup, and dusted with powdered sugar. The sausage patties were a bonus.

At eleven o'clock coast time, the phone rang. Stone caught it first. It was Carol.

"Names help a bunch. So does a guy in the Agency who is hot after my bod. He said they just found out about the man's death, and his file was being reviewed. Nothing confidential or earth shattering. All I had to do was agree to a date for tonight, and he told me everything he knew. Got a pencil?"

"Tape is on, fire away."

"Garrick worked out of Bangkok. His specialty was Lao-Chinese border relations. He was in Bangkok for four years and returning for a change of assignment. He was not considered a sensitive operations man. Nothing he knew of on the Lao-Chinese border should have made him a target. He obviously was.

"My contact says the only other possible scenario is drugs. That is a tremendously important heroin-producing area—the old favorite, poppies. He might have crossed one of the poppy kings and been targeted. Period, end of report. Now, where do I find an iron chastity belt for my date?"

"I'll send you one."

"What I don't do for the good of the cause! And to help throw you into the arms of a former lover."

"Thanks, Carol."

"Soldier... be careful over there. Let me know what happens."

"I will."

He hung up, feeling elated that he knew the man's name, and his assignment. But also feeling like a heel. He had asked Carol to do a job that could spin them apart forever.

Stone thought again about Garrick. He must have been coming to see Stone when he was gunned down. Why would a poppy king's killer wait until Garrick got into the U.S. before he killed him?

A problem, and it would remain one until he found out who did kill Garrick, and why.

His phone buzzed and he picked it up. Kathy had recovered from her early morning wake-up and said he had a call on line two.

"Good morning."

"Yeah man, it is a good morning. This is José, José Ortega."

"You're still alive. How are the Hombres?"

"I don't even think about them no more. I got me a job!"

"Gainful employment?"

"Yeah, man. This little grocery store."

"I'm glad, José. And school this fall?"

The line was silent for a while.

"Yeah. Damn. I already promised my mom. She said I should thank you for savin' my skin."

"You're welcome."

"Heard four of Los Hombres got smashed up pretty bad in that explosion out at the factory. Two got burned, and they lost one of the lowriders."

"That's what happens, José. When kids play with fire, they get burned."

"Damn, but you are a cool one. You did all that out there?"

"Out where, José?"

He laughed. "Yeah, yeah. I got to get to work, man. Thanks."

They said good-bye and hung up. Stone stared at the phone. The China-Laos border. Most of it cliffs and mountains.

*Rosalyn might be there... alive!*

He had to go. There was no way he could avoid going.

He wanted Hog and Terrance with him, but first he had to find them. He picked up the phone, then put it down.

Duffy would not give him anything about the men over the phone.

He grabbed his leather jacket and sunglasses and drove to the bar called Soldier of Fortune.

It was just after the noon whistle when Stone pushed through the tavern doors. *Soldier of Fortune* magazines were stacked up on the bar. Stone bought one and was sitting at the bar reading it when a hunched-over giant of a man with a full beard and shoulder length hair leaned over the bar facing Stone.

"Yeah, cowboy?"

Stone watched the man's small eyes peering at him through round, steel-rimmed eyeglasses.

"I need to find a couple of my friends."

"We all need something, cowboy."

"Hog Wiley and Terrance Loughlin. You said they went out on a job. They work with me."

"Yeah, they signed in two, three weeks ago. Anxious to get some work. Location fee is twenty bucks a head. You buying?"

Stone put one of the drug loot fifties on the counter and held his thumb on one end of it.

“So?”

“El Salvador. The government there’s getting their ass kicked bad in one of the provinces, and your pals were hired to try and shape up the troops before it’s too late.”

“They due back?”

“Open-ended contract, a thousand a week. I’m their agent.”

For another fifty dollars, Stone got a telephone number in El Salvador.

He slid into his Lancia and headed back toward his office. Suddenly two Latin males rushed from an alley and fired a shot at him. The round was low, punching a hole in the Lancia’s passenger side door. Stone twisted the wheel in an avoidance maneuver, then barreled down the street.

The Mexicans jumped in a car and caught up with him at a stoplight where he couldn’t bust through a stream of traffic. The Beretta slid into his hand and he put a 9mm parabellum through the gunman’s side window, then he raced away with the light change, swerved in front of the other car, a six-year-old Ford, and jolted into a skidding right turn that was too sharp for the Ford behind it. The Mexican’s car skidded into a light pole, shattering the windshield, with half of the sandwiched glass falling in small pellets onto the front seat.

Stone goosed the Lancia and skidded around the next corner, blasting through a stop sign and vanishing without seeing the Ford in his rearview. He stormed down another half mile, then pulled to the curb and stopped.

He had lost them.

Latinos, Cal-Mex. He’d bet a million they were friends of El Lobo. But how had they tied him in? When he talked to José Ortega and the Hombres, he had used a taxi. The kids had not tailed him. They could have contacted the taxi firm, but that wasn’t likely.

There could have been some long-range spotter duty at the desert PCP plant. Possible. A patrol might have picked up his license number.

So they had found him.

They wouldn’t see him again.

He drove the Lancia to the repair garage he used and parked inside. He told Willy to patch up the bullet hole so nobody would ever know and to give it a tune-up and check the transmission. Then store it for a while.

“Trip, Mr. Stone?”

“Short one.” He gave Willy three hundred on account, and didn’t bother with a receipt. They had been friends for years, and Stone told no one about Willy’s one-man operation. He didn’t want to share a master mechanic and body man with anybody!

Outside he watched the street for five minutes, but saw no one. He walked six blocks, to a better-traveled street, and found a pay phone.

Kathy picked up the phone on the first ring.

“Kathy, there are some things I want you to get for me from my desk and put in that small suitcase in the closet. I’ll be taking a trip. Is Ben in yet?”

“Yes, he is. He was on a stakeout last night, but he’s here for a while.”

“After I give you this list, switch me to him.” Stone told her what to get—his passport, a money belt he had loaded with ten thousand dollars in hundreds, and the rest of the travel gear that he would need. She was to leave the suitcase near the back door, so he could pick it up late that night.

Ben came on the wire sounding tired.

“Ben, I need to take a short trip to Central America. Keep the ship afloat here. Any problems?”

“Just lack of sleep, and the teams of Chicanos who’ve been watching our front and back doors since about one o’clock.”

“They’re watching for me. A small disagreement over some PCP.”

“Christ, was that you?”

“Friend of a friend was involved. Figured it was time to put that cooker out of business. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“That would be good. I’m starting to feel like I own this outfit.”

“You probably should. Want to buy me out?”

“Just kidding. Have a good trip.”

Stone leaned against the phone booth. He sighed and rubbed his face.

The China-Laos border. A rugged, wild, almost free zone, where there was no control by Laos or Vietnam, and little official interference, even by the strict Chinese. It had been a mountainous fortress in the old days, when no one was even sure where the international boundary went. He wondered if they knew even today.

Rosalyn.

Rosalyn James! It had taken him ten years to forget her, to lay her to rest. To get over the loss. Now he felt the daggers of pain piercing his chest again.

Not knowing was the hardest part. He had had his own M.I.A. in the war. He knew the pain, the agony, the despair of not knowing for sure. Long ago, he had logically determined that more than ninety-nine percent of the M.I.A.s were really dead, skeletons covered by the vines and voracious jungle plants.

Like other relatives and friends of M.I.A.s, he had always harbored that one haunting hope that Rosalyn might have been one of those who lived through it.

The Army had found the wreckage of the medevac chopper a month after it went down. But there had been an explosion and an aviation fuel fire, and little was left of the bird or the crew. Vietnamese scavengers had stripped everything of value from the wreckage.

The official report still read M.I.A., because there had been no chance for a sifting of ashes and study of the remains for an absolute identification. The Viet Cong owned that area. The judgment was that everyone on board probably had died, if they had been in the chopper when it crashed and exploded.

*Rosalyn, if you’re there, hang on. I’m coming to get you out.*

## Chapter 11

He didn’t need a visa to travel to El Salvador. Only a travel permit was required, and that could be obtained at the consulate on Hightower Street.

He took a taxi and got the travel permit with a twenty-dollar bribe to the clerk. The clerk said it would take a week to arrange for the permit, but the picture of President Jackson on the crisp new twenty had convinced him he could do it in five minutes.

Then, stopping at a Goodwill store, Stone bought a brown felt hat, a cane, and an old man's sport coat, two sizes too big for him.

He put on his sunglasses, and by the time he stepped from the cab, nobody would mistake him for Mark Stone. The cane and his "crippled" right leg completed the disguise. He stared at a piece of paper in his hand, then at the number on the door, and hobbled up close to read the number. Then he bobbed his head and limped on the cane into his North Hollywood office.

"Yes, sir?" Kathy said.

Stone tossed her the cane, pulled off the glasses and the old hat, and grinned.

"Mr. Stone!"

"Any messages?"

There were a dozen calls, one from a U.S. senator wanting Stone to testify about all he knew concerning M.I.A.s. He ignored it. Another whitewash.

He checked the rest and decided they could wait. Then he went through the suitcase Kathy had packed for him and took out another ten thousand in cash from the PCP cash. He might need a little more bribe money along the way.

Kathy made a reservation for him through a travel agent on three airlines to get him to El Salvador. He was always worried about flying Central American and Mexican airlines. So far, so good.

Ben came into his office. Ben was short, bald, innocuous looking. A perfect private eye. He could blend easily into any wall.

"We still have our watchbirds out front and back," Ben reported. "They've cut the manpower down to one at each spot. See the same faces every day. Where did Kathy say you're going?"

Stone told him.

"Must be some good reason. As for me, I never lost anything down there. I sure as hell ain't going looking for it."

"I did lose something. Hog and Terrance."

"Oh. And when you find them?"

Stone told Ben as much as he knew.

Ben shook his head. "I think I better go to Mass every morning and light a few candles for you. You're going to need all the help you can get!"

"Wouldn't hurt," Stone rasped. He finished his collection, took the suitcase, and handed it to Ben. "Call me a cab. Then you have to help me out to it with the bag. Couldn't carry it in my feeble condition."

"I love this play acting. Do I get a better part in our next show?"

"You can always be the one who gets shot at," Stone growled and Ben laughed.

The exiting charade worked perfectly. Stone even waved at the young Latino sitting in his lowrider across the street.

He caught his flight out of L.A. International at 7:45 the next morning. Two days, four different airlines, and six aircraft later, he arrived at the provincial



capital in Southern El Salvador. The plane was met by guards toting submachine guns.

When he left California, it had been a comfortable eighty degrees. El Salvador's temperature was a hundred and ten. The taxi that took him to the hotel was not even air conditioned.

"Back to basics," Stone mumbled, and stared out the window at the lush tropical growth.

The humidity had to be in the ninety percent range. He had worn a thin shirt and a tropical white jacket, which he promptly took off. The taxi driver spoke no English, and Stone's Spanish was straight out of high school.

They finally found the hotel, and Stone paid the cabbie. He looked forward to lying down on a real bed for one night before he found Hog and Loughlin. At the hotel, government soldiers had set up a defense perimeter around the building. A sergeant examined his luggage and made sure he had no personal weapons.

"We must take all precautions," the sergeant said in excellent English. "Arizona State, class of '83!" he added, to explain his good English.

"What's going on here, Sergeant?"

"There is a major offensive under way against the rebels in this province, señor. Very, very dangerous for everyone. All foreign tourists have been restricted to the Palms Hotel for their safety. You understand."

"But I have business here."

"Señor, our business now is to defend our nation. We are under martial law."

"Sergeant, have you heard of a Mr. Wiley and Mr. Loughlin?"

His face beamed. "Oh, *Si!* I had the honor of attending Colonel Wiley's class in basic infiltration. He is brilliant!"

"Uh, right, sure he is. Look, I taught the colonel everything he knows. I'm his commanding officer, and I must get into the field at once."

That changed everything. The soldier, whose stitched name tag identified him as Sergeant Alfredo, could barely contain himself. Stone could not recall ever having impressed anyone so, simply by the dubious distinction of knowing Hog Wiley.

"But of course! We will leave in five minutes. We can go to my barracks and furnish you with a uniform and weapons. We leave at once." He turned and barked orders. Three men snapped to attention and ran to replace him at the curb. Another man jumped into a Jeep and jolted it to a stop in front of the sergeant.

He stepped into the back seat and motioned for Stone's bag to be lifted in. Then he asked Stone if he would ride in the front seat.

"We would have a staff car here for you, *Señor* Stone, but we had no idea you were coming. Colonel Wiley speaks of you often in our training."

"Where is the, uh, *Colonel* now?"

"He has taken command of a unit of regulars who are chasing a rebel band to the north."

A half hour later, Stone was given a khaki, lightweight uniform, and his choice of a well-worn Russian AK-47 automatic rifle, an old M1 Garrand from the U.S., or a U.S. .30-caliber carbine. There was no choice. He took the AK-47, checked its operation, then asked for a dozen of the thirty-round magazines. They came almost at once, all loaded correctly. He charged the rifle, and worked the lever six times. The rounds all sprang out of the receiver. The weapon would fire.

“A pistol?” Stone requested.

Alfredo brought him a 1911 U.S. Army issue .45 and three magazines.

“Best we have, sir,” he said. Stone took it, and hung the issue holster on his belt.

“Let’s go so we can get there before dark.”

The ride was rough, the country roads were terrible, and it was a good thing they had a jeep. At last it refused to go up a forty-degree climb with loose rocks all over the trail.

“We walk,” Stone said stepping out of the rig.

An hour later, they came through a heavy patch of jungle growth on the hills, and met a sentry. Alfredo quickly got them past, and a quarter of a mile along the trail they found a machine gun emplacement. Just beyond that was the temporary camp.

Alfredo looked around a moment, then pointed to a tent at the side of the makeshift camp. They walked toward it and found three guards barring their way at the tent flap.

Alfredo gave a curt command and the men stepped back, weapons at present arms in a salute. Stone touched his cap, returning the salutes, and pushed aside the tent flap. A wildly bearded apparition, looking slightly absurd in a new khaki uniform, was cursing to himself over a map, something about “a piss-assed way to fight a war.”

“Hell, change it, Hog!” Stone grinned.

The apparition whirled, stared at Stone, then guffawed, snapped to attention, and popped a salute.

“General Stone, sir. It’s good to see you.”

Stone returned the salute with a wink, then walked forward and took the offered hand. That turned into a heartfelt bearhug between these two hellground buddies.

“Great to see ya, Sarge, but what the fuck are you doing in this banana nuthouse?”

“I’m going back to ’Nam, Hog. Again. M.I.A. stuff. I need you and Terrance.”

“Wouldn’t like nothin’ better,” Wiley assured him, “and that’s God’s truth. Only trouble is, me and the limey got ourselves a little war going on here.”

“Who’s winning?”

“Right now, they are.”

“Let’s let them win and let’s get out of here.”

“Uh, that’s the problem, Sarge. We let them win, we won’t be able to get out of here. We’ll be a pair, no, three heads on three poles.”

“Where’s Terrance?”

“He’s with our other battalion. They’re catching hell from a handful, maybe a hundred rebels. The fuckers came up with a lot of hot weapons from somewhere. Fidel probably.”

Hog spit at the ground, then continued. “We win this battle, then we can tell President Scumbag that his troops have been properly trained and there’s nothing more we can do.”

“Will he buy that?”

“He might. But it’s better than getting our balls shot off out in this jungle.”

A man entered the tent and spoke quickly to Alfredo. He came forward, saluting.

“Sirs. I have a message from Colonel Loughlin. The runner says they have been hit by a second force using automatic rifles and shoulder-fired RPGs. They have been forced to retreat and have lost a third of their men. Request immediate reinforcement.”

“Alert the men,” Col. Wiley rasped. “Then order all my officers here on the double. Be ready to move out every man in ten minutes. Full field packs, full weapons and ammo. Let’s move it!”

When they left, Hog threw down his swagger stick and picked up an AK-47, then stuffed three loaded magazines inside his shirt.

“We got ourselves a real war here, man. Not enough good weapons. Too many men who can’t use them, and about as much backup as a go-go girl.”

“You think Terrance is in over his head?”

“Damn close to it. Let’s get over there and see.”

They hurried outside and saw ranks of men forming. Twenty were left behind to guard the camp; the rest, fully combat ready, marched away with a ten-man point on the three-mile trail to the fighting.

As they left, Stone saw a Suzuki .350 cc dirt bike, polished and bright, sitting under a tarp.

“That’s Loughlin’s pride and joy since he got here,” Hog said. “Won’t let anybody touch it. He rides like a crazy man.”

“Put in some time on a dirt bike myself,” Stone said.

They marched for half an hour, when suddenly the point was hit by a band of rebels. By the time the main party closed in, the four rebels were wiped out. Hog lost two of his men. They sent the dead to the rear, and pushed on. Ten minutes later, a connecting file man contacted elements of Terrance’s unit.

A runner came back and reported.

“Colonel Loughlin’s unit is fully engaged with an estimated two hundred rebels. Outcome is inconclusive.” Hog and Stone went forward with the point and ten minutes later bellied down a log and shook hands with Loughlin. The British merc didn’t seem surprised at all to find Stone.

“Bloody nice of you chaps to rush up here this way. My ass is in a fucking sling!”

“How many men do you have, Loughlin?” Stone asked.

“What they call a battalion, about three hundred men. But some of them don’t even have weapons.”

“A platoon down here is thirty men. A company ninety,” Hog explained. “We don’t know where they got three hundred men.”

“We’ve uncovered the edge of their stronghold,” Loughlin continued briefing Stone. “They must’ve been working and building up this point for months. That’s why they’re defending it so strongly. If we can blast through this point, they’ll be cut off from their main supply route, and be broken up into small units.

“In short, they would be back to guerilla warfare, and that the government can contain.”

Hog ordered up the only artillery they had, three old 81-mm mortars from U.S. surplus, with three hundred HE heavy rounds. The range was less than five hundred yards.

The three mortars settled their baseplates with two rounds, then fired for their forward observers to give them firing corrections. The telephones worked well, and, with three more rounds, the big mortar bombs were dropping inside the rebel stronghold.

“Fire for effect, twenty rounds each gun!” Hog bellowed.

Every five seconds, three rounds thundered out of the tubes and rained like death on the rebels. For two minutes, the bombs fell steadily on the enemy, dropping in with no whistled warning like an artillery shell. Mortars keep everyone’s heads in the deepest hole they can find.

The gunners looked at their sergeant, who gave one gun a small aiming change. Hog waited five minutes, then ordered thirty rounds per gun fired. It would use up half of his ammo supply for the makeshift artillery.

Hog passed the word. As soon as the last mortar round hit, there would be a general advance, all the way along the line which now covered three sides of the knob of the hill where the rebels had made their stand.

Stone saw a canvas-covered pile of supplies, and looked underneath. The boxes were unfamiliar, but inside he found something he knew: LAWs! Light Artillery Weapons. Shoulder artillery that packed more punch than a howitzer.

How many? He counted a dozen boxes.

The mortars stopped firing, and the men rose up from behind logs and trees, moving ahead cautiously, running from cover to cover.

One rebel rifle snarled from above, then another, and suddenly the whole jungle mountain top rattled with automatic and single shot fire. Stone hit the dirt from instinct, even though none of the rounds were near him.

The LAWs were for specific targets, not assault fire. How could he use them? He pondered it a moment, then found Alfredo and had him send a man back to the base camp. He told Alfredo what he wanted and the man shook his head.

“No man but me can run it. Alfredo can do the job.” He beamed and took off at a trot for the rear area.

Stone grinned, and moved up to the fighting line. He found Loughlin commanding the left flank and moving his men forward. After another two hundred yards of slogging up the hill, they came to a point where they could advance no farther.

“They’ve got trenches up there!” Hog shouted. “Can you fucking imagine that? Trenches in the damned jungle?” The two studied the situation from behind a large tree.

The trenches were evidently deep enough for a man to stand in, and firing points had been created and fields of fire cleared below them. It was a tightly fortified hilltop.

“Too far for grenades,” Loughlin said, “even if we had any.”

“Mortars would take a hundred rounds just to zero in on a two-foot-wide trench,” Stone said. “What about those LAWs down there?”

“Only ones we have,” Hog said. “Those are for the wrap-up.”

“Without three of them on that trench, you won’t have a wrap-up.”

Hog nodded, called to Loughlin, and they worked back down through the brush and jungle to the mortars. Again he gave the order for test rounds. When his report came back that they were well on target, Hog nodded.

“Fire for effect, the rest of your rounds!”

The bombardment lasted for about four minutes, as they began staggering their shots, hoping to catch the enemy trying to move between spaced rounds.

By the time the firing was over, Hog and Stone were in position, about fifty yards from the rebel trench line that was up a sharp rise. They had carried four of the LAWs up to the concealed position. Hog sighted in with the first one, and fired. A second later, from ten yards away, Stone fired the second LAW.

Both exploded almost at the same time, fifteen yards apart. One tore through a light berm on the face of the trench, and went off with a shattering blast. The second hit just above the trench, and the resulting dirt slide buried a ten-foot section, and swept down into the jungle below.

They fired two more rounds, working outward from the original hits, and again landed almost on target, negating about fifty feet of the trench.

Hog shouted orders, and troops loyal to El Presidente lifted up and darted forward from protective cover to rocks and trees. There was little return fire, and soon a dozen men were over the top of the trench and laying down covering fire along the trench and above for the rest of the troops to advance.

They heard the screams and firing from the other side of the front. Stone worked his way around through the jungle and found four men badly burned.

By the time he rushed up to the front line, Loughlin was sputtering and furious.

“Napalm! The bloody bastards are using napalm!”

Stone scowled. “You sure?”

“You saw the wounded. We lost twelve men as well. They’re throwing gallon jugs filled with napalm down the mountain like gasoline bombs, with burning wicks. When it hits, the whole thing splatters into fire!”

“More crispy critters,” Stone growled. He and Loughlin went back to the base camp for more of the LAWs. It looked like the only way they were going to get to the top was to blast their way up.

Stone looked up and took aim. His first shot was short, and the upward angle brought the missile down early, shattering a great rain of rocks on the sheer face.

Hog adjusted his second round and it slammed into the peak less than four feet from the top. There was a roar, as a secondary explosion took place and ten feet more of the rocky mountain top blasted outward and rained rocks down the slanting rocky face.

“I owe you,” Loughlin said. “Sounds like you hit their ever-loving powder magazine!”

But after the big explosion, the rebel riflemen around the defensive ring seemed to increase their fire. Every time a man exposed himself, he got shot at and often hit. Then, just as it grew dark, the defenders above sent a three-minute crashing volley of rifle fire down the hill, forcing everyone to dive for cover.

Stone was getting an idea. He chanced a look upward along the remains of what had once been a road cutting up that jungle-sided hill, making one switchback before becoming a comparatively straight path, lost beyond the smoke of battle and the dense jungle.

He stayed low and eased back to where he counted the LAWs left.

Six.

That would have to be enough.

Taking a pair of binoculars, he bellied his way past men ducking, firing, swearing, and dying, to where he could see the top of the hill. He studied it carefully, but found only signs of one bunker. From that angle he could not see where the explosion had been.

There had to be more there. He studied the whole area down the hill by a grid system, and soon found where two firing positions had been dug. They were big enough for machine guns or six soldiers.

Back at the base camp he had coffee, and talked with Hog and Terrance.

"Today's got to be the bloody day we wrap this up," Terrance snapped impatiently.

"You bet your British ass," Hog agreed.

## Chapter 12

It was well into the hot afternoon before they found a chance to use the LAWs. They had pushed past the trench all along the line now, and were within a quarter of a mile of the top of the mountain. They still only had the three-sided attack, leaving the back door open for easy retreat.

"If the bastards know they have a way out, they won't fight so bloody hard," Loughlin had suggested. "We just want to win this one battle and get out of here. For myself, I'll let someone else finish the war."

They came to a facing of rock that held no vegetation at all. It slanted upward sharply, and went all the way to the top of the hill.

"Bet this rebel general has his command post up there on the far side," Hog said.

Loughlin agreed. "A flyer says you can't lay one of our LAWs right on the top of the point up there."

"You're on!" Hog said, and had a LAW brought up. He judged the distance and the upward slope. Then he scowled. "I get two tries at it?"

"Three, if you need them."

Hog gripped the LAW in his beefy hands, and studied the silent mountain top.

"On the far side there should be a better way up," Stone said. "We can use the LAWs as our air strikes, and move right up the hill. Let's get a full-scale assault started, before they wake up up there."

He brought up the rest of the troops and showed Hog and Terrance what he wanted. The flank forces would strike first with assault fire, moving as high and fast as possible. Then the LAWs would take out the two-gun positions, and an assault up the hill to the top would begin on the central portion. The men agreed and ran to their sectors to get the troops ready.

Hog fired three quick shots and they launched the attack on the objective from both flanks.

Stone had Alfredo bring up his secret weapon, and carefully attached two of the LAWs to the frame, allowing room for movement.

Then he watched the fighting. The government troops fought well, moving carefully, then charging across open areas. The higher on the hill they were, the rockier it became, with less and less jungle growth.

Stone gave them five minutes, then moved up to his vantage point, judged the distance and the uphill shoot, and fired the first LAW. It was six feet off center but blew a mounted machine gun into rubble, and three gunners with it. Something else exploded, and Alfredo said it probably was a box of grenades. Some of them had been stolen recently from one of the army units.

Stone concentrated on the next gun nest, aimed in, and fired. This time he was slightly high, but the round set off an earth slide that completely buried the gun and gunners.

He blasted a whistle twice and his own troops moved forward, screaming, yelling, and gunning down everything ahead of them. They advanced quickly for a hundred yards, then slowed.

Stone had told Alfredo to keep the machine close with the advance. He did. By the time they got to the switchback in the road, the troops were pinned down behind the last good jungle cover.

In front of them was a barren slope extending a hundred yards upward to the top of the hill. New trenches had been dug up there to give the rebels cover.

Soon his troops would be close enough for the defenders to use grenades, if they had any. Stone sent runners to both sides. When they came back, he confirmed that the other troops on the sides were pinned down at about the same spot.

He checked the road. It was clear from here to the top. He had spotted the trenches now, and two fortified bunkers near the very top. It was time to unleash his secret weapon.

He briefed Alfredo, rolled out the dirt bike, and checked to see how the LAW weapons were lashed on board. He would aim them by aiming the cycle. So simple, it had to work.

The hundred and twenty soldiers were instructed where to fire, and when to stop. Then Stone gave the order for a twenty-round-per-man assault fire sequence. The rifles stuttered and banged as the rounds poured up the hill.

When the last shot sounded, Stone already had the bike started and warmed up, then he blasted up the hill in second gear, snarling around the bend and slamming straight for the top bunkers. He figured he had fifty yards of surprise before the firing came. When it did, his troops were instructed to fire at the side bunkers. He hoped they got the message.

Twenty seconds later, the first shots blasted from above.

He needed another twenty yards.

Firing began below, and he bent low on the bike and goosed it up the hill. Another ten yards!

He bent and fired the LAW on the right side. It tilted the bike a moment, as it screamed ahead up the hill. It was like shooting at the side of a barn. The LAW bored through the light side of the bunker and exploded inside, hurling weapons and bodies into the air.

He turned the bike slightly, aimed it at the second defensive bunker, then reached down and fired. It hit only the far corner of the bunker, but had enough killing force to silence every gun inside.

Then Stone put the bike into a slide and rolled behind his real target, a ledge of rock three feet high that would give him total protection from any surviving gunners.

From below he saw his troops on their feet storming upward. The guns from above rattled off a few shots, then went silent. He lifted up and watched the trench, then the bunkers. There was no movement.

Stone was up and moving, the government troops storming past him, clearing the trenches and the bunkers on top. Men from the sides climbed the last few yards and closed the pincers.

The rebels who were not dead on the site had retreated down the back slope of the hill. The battle had ended.

That evening, Hog, Terrance, and Stone luxuriated in the largest suite in the only hotel in town with air conditioning. Terrance had taken a shower and three baths, and Hog had settled for a shower and hours of sleep.

Their flight was scheduled to leave first thing in the morning.

"So we got out with our skins," Hog snorted upon waking. "The bonus was nice, though. Five thousand dollars. I can use that for my college fund."

"You going to college?" Terrance did a double take. "Hello no, but I can have a college fund. I might want to buy a college sometime."

"*El Presidente* is happy, Alfredo got promoted to captain, and the dictator deals on," Stone said, summing up. "I just hope we make it out of here before they have another rebel offensive. Now, you guys know the schedule from here on?"

"Mexico City, then Hawaii, and on to Bangkok," Hog grunted. "We've been there before."

"This is a little strange," Stone cautioned. "We don't have an exact point to start our search. We don't know for sure we have a real M.I.A. All we have for sure are three words from a dead man."

"Hell, I told you that's good enough for me," Loughlin said. "This one is on the house. We owe you for getting our tails out of the wringer down here."

"Then why don't you guys take a couple of hours, pack up your money, and let's get out of here."

"Not before I have another steak dinner," Loughlin yelled. "You know in Laos we're not going to have any beef. Bloody well better get it on this side!"

Captain Alfredo met them at the plane with an honor guard. He told the pilot he absolutely could not fly until the "General" came on board and was given a seven-gun salute.

It was done, and Stone felt slightly embarrassed, but he popped the new captain a smart salute and stepped into the well-worn DC-3 that was to take them on the first leg of their trip up to San Salvador where they would catch a 727 jet. At least that was the plan. You could never tell about connections or aircraft down here in do-it-tomorrow land.

Stone figured he could get all the supplies he needed from An Khom in Bangkok. That crafty arms and information dealer had served him well in the past.

*Rosalyn.*



Somehow he could not believe it—would not believe it until he held that long lost woman in his arms. *It had been almost fourteen years...*

The jet settled into the airport in Mexico City. Stone was always surprised at how big Mexico City was. More than fifteen million people in the metropolitan area!

Twenty minutes later, in a quiet discussion at another airline ticket counter, their good luck ran out.

“I’m sorry, but we’ve had two aircraft taken out of service due to mechanical problems. All flights to Hawaii today have been canceled. We’ll reschedule you as quickly as possible.”

It took two days to get out of Mexico City. Stone fumed. Hog went out on the town testing his Spanish. Loughlin looked up the British Embassy and got a tour of the city from a lonesome young secretary from London.

Stone just fumed, and made phone calls from their hotel room.

Hog got arrested for insulting a Mexican policeman. Stone bailed him out.

Loughlin spent the night at the London girl’s apartment, and was helping her with plans for redecoration when Stone located him.

“We fly out of here in an hour and fifteen minutes.”

Hog and Stone left for the airport, and met Loughlin there four minutes before the plane was scheduled to leave.

“Damn, he made it again,” Hog brayed, as Terrance slid into his aisle seat.

“You can tell the crew that we can take off now,” Terrance said. Almost at once a flight attendant was beside Loughlin to see if he needed any special service. He laughed softly, told her how pretty she was, and made a date for the overnight stopover in Honolulu.

Stone settled down in his seat and began studying a map of the Laos-China border.

## **Chapter 13**

### ***Vietnam, 1974.***

Lt. Rosalyn James groaned, then screamed. It was dark. Why was it dark? She had just been in the chopper in broad daylight.

The helicopter! The medevac bird.

*Oh, God, they had been going down, crashing into the trees!*

Her wrist hurt so bad she knew it was broken. For a moment she didn’t know where she was. Then she felt the branches, leaves, small twigs. She started to move and the whole area where she lay jiggled and swayed and threatened to collapse.

Automatically she grabbed onto the largest branch she could find.

God, the helicopter was hit bad by ground fire and they were going in, crashing! She remembered the bullets. One Marine had been killed by a round that slammed upward through the floor! Then they hit the trees...

Yes! Yes, she could remember now. *She had fallen out of the helicopter!* Just as they hit the tops of the tallest trees, the bird had pivoted and she slid out the open door before she could catch hold of anything!

She must have passed out.

Then the pain came in her wrist and her legs.

*Take it slow, from the top. Easy now, easy. Remember your training. Don't lose control. Don't panic!*

She was *alive*. Check.

She had fallen out of a helicopter about to land. Right. The bird must have crashed nearby. She would find out. It must be night, so she had been unconscious for some time.

She was lying on some branches. Was she still in a tree? If she were in a tree, how far was it to the ground? She had no idea.

As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, she could see shapes. Trees all around her. A large tree trunk six or eight feet away, but smooth, no limbs. She tried to look down but she lay on her back and her shoulder was in the way.

Slowly, a centimeter at a time, she edged around so she could look past her shoulder. The branches creaked.

Something slipped. She seemed to drop a few inches but then the branches caught and held.

She edged around more and could see past her shoulder. Slowly, gently, she brought her right hand over by her left shoulder and parted leaves and small branches.

Nothing. Too thick. Could she drop something? What? Her hand went to her neck and she grinned in the darkness. A stethoscope! Good old habit patterns! Gently she removed the rig from her neck with her right hand and searched in the inky gloom for the best place to toss it.

Branches nearly covered her. She looked upward but could not see any stars. It was not raining. Conclusion: she could be well below the first canopy of tree tops.

But how far below?

A particularly black place looked like an opening in the brush and branches. She flipped the stethoscope at the dark void with her good right hand, and held her breath.

Almost at once it hit something. She counted. At three she heard another noise as if it had hit something else. Then no more sound.

A count to three, a nervous, fast count to three. It could be that the ground was only ten feet down. She couldn't stay there all night. She might go to sleep, turn over and fall.

Down. She had to get down to the ground. Gingerly she gripped the two-inch-thick branch with her pained left hand, then took a new hold on it with her right and tugged. The branch moved a little... downward. She tugged again and it moved another three inches.

*Action time. Do something.* She held on to the branch and began to kick and thrash around with her legs. She slid a foot downward. The branch stopped her. She kicked again and suddenly her feet broke through the branches and dangled through, free of any support.

Oh, God. How high up was she?

Then with all of her weight on the two-inch branch, it began to move, to slide over the others, to accept her weight and bend toward the ground. For a moment she thought she was falling again, but then the branch slowed her descent and nearly stopped. She kicked her feet again and hit something.

Almost afraid, she looked down. Most of the branches were gone now, slipped past her. She saw nothing but blackness below.

*But she had kicked something!* She kicked again with both feet and felt it again.

Slowly, she eased her grip with her left hand, moved it below her right and glued onto the new hold. Then she slid her right hand down the branch, gaining a foot of distance downward. This time when she kicked her feet, she felt something solid.

The jungle floor? She moved lower on the branch and let her feet take her weight. They held her.

She was down!

She slumped on the wet jungle floor, not worried what danger might be there. She was down! She had fallen out of a chopper and survived!

Now for the first time, she smelled something. Chemicals? No. Smoke? Then she knew. She had worked an aircraft crash once on the end of the airfield at Da Nang. It smelled the same way, burned metal, burned... bodies. Steam, rain. It had to be the chopper, which must have crashed and burned nearby.

For a moment the smell almost gagged her. She took several deep breaths and took firm control.

She had to find the crash, to see if anyone else had survived. She stood and took a step and slammed into a tree. With a whimper she slid back to the ground and leaned against the tree. The best thing to do was to stay there until daylight. Then she would search. She bent her head and tried to sleep. She wasn't sure what time it was. It was too dark to see her watch.

Morning... she had to wait for sunrise. Then she would see how scratched up she was. Her wrist didn't hurt so much. She moved it, felt the bones. It probably wasn't broken, or she wouldn't be turning it so much.

"Good, not broken," she said out loud. Her voice frightened her. Then she took control again. She always had been able to take command, get things done, even at bad times.

Accident. Yes, a bad one here. If she survived, then others must have, or may have. She would find them in the morning. They could get the compass off the bird and hike out of here.

First, some sleep. She tucked her head on her knees, hugged her legs with both arms, and slept.

Every twenty or thirty minutes, she woke up, wondering what time it was. At last, when she awoke, it was nearly full daylight. Sun streamed down through the double canopy. At once she could smell the burned helicopter.

She looked around before she moved.

No one watched her.

She stood and carefully tested all of her limbs. Even her left wrist felt better now, not broken. Her tough fatigue pants had several rips and tears in them. Her fatigue shirt was better, but also torn. There would be some scratches, but nothing deep. She nodded in thanks for that much.

The bird, where had it crashed? She went toward the smell. It was like the stench of an oven when you use a chemical cleaner or a furnace that fires up for the first time. A metallic taste more than a smell. She pushed aside small trees and vines and worked toward the odor.

Everything decomposes quickly in the jungle, but that did not account for the strong smell. The closer she came the more she remembered the air crash.

*It was burning human flesh she smelled!*

Rosalyn stopped. Yes, she had experienced it before. She began breathing through her mouth and pushed through the jungle.

She came on it suddenly. One moment she was in dense jungle, the next she was in a small opening that the bird had made as it crashed through the top canopy, and then exploded as it hit the lower trees and the ground. Sheared-off tree tops heaped to one side. Branches, leaves, sticks, cluttered the whole area.

In the center was all that was left of the medevac chopper. The shattered hulk of the cabin with empty windows, the metal strained and pressured until it bent almost in half. It lay scorched and some melted, clean of paint. Raw aluminum and rivet heads.

Smoke trailed up from what had been the engine compartment. All around the dead metal carcass, the jungle had been scorched and burned right down to the ground. Half a tank of aviation fuel had gushed out of the tanks, caught fire or exploded or both, reducing all combustibles into white ash. There were the ashes of seven men in there somewhere. She didn't see how anyone who rode the ship down could have survived.

She had fallen out far enough away to escape the horrendous fireball. But the fall? She stared up at the top canopy of branches, maybe only 75 feet from the ground here. The bird was already breaking through that level when she slid out the door.

She must have hit the lower branches of the upper level, and that broke her fall as she crashed into the lower tree tops and smashed enough of the limbs and branches downward so they caught and formed a kind of net that slowed her fall gradually, stopping it short of the ground.

Enough!

She had to hike out of here. First, she walked all the way around the death crash. She saw no sign of any survivors. Then she located the sun through the top canopy. She faced it. That had to be east. Her right hand had to be south, her left north. They had flown north and inland.

She turned south and began walking.

A half hour later she was drenched with sweat and wished desperately for a shower. She had worked along the side of a narrow valley and when it turned the wrong way, she sighted in on a new marker and climbed up the side of a low hill. She sat and rested near a giant teak tree.

Then she thought of her watch. 8:32. It was still running. She wound it, and wondered how long it would take her to walk twenty miles to the south.

After a five-minute rest period, she got to her feet, groaned softly, and flexed her wrist. Sprained, she decided. Not the best condition, but she felt remarkably lucky to be alive.

She wondered about her escape from death.

Divine intervention? That would be a little hard for her to swallow with her minimum belief in any religion, Christianity in particular. So that left chance. Random chance, the philosophers called it. Fate? Again, a concept that she could not tolerate. Why work and strain and struggle if your life, your work, your pleasures, and your ultimate demise are already written in some huge Director of Personnel's log in the sky?

Stupidity? Now she might be getting to it. If she had been strapped in the way she should have been for the liftoff, she would be dead today. If she had grabbed something and hung on as the pilot told her to, she would be part of that pile of gray-white ash. There was something to be said for stupidity.

She moved again after another rest, came down from the low ridge, and faced a shallow river. If she followed it downstream, it would eventually come to the coast. The South Vietnamese controlled the coastline.

She heard children laughing, high-pitched voices screaming in delight!

They splashed into sight in the shallow stream, six of them, boys and girls from six to eight years old, all naked.

She pulled back into the jungle. The children had a water fight as they moved by. She watched and waited, pondering her next move. Downstream would make her an easy target for the Viet Cong searchers. They checked every downed plane and chopper for prisoners and valuables. They wouldn't get much out of this one. No, not downstream. She looked along the river, then waded across quickly, realizing that her shoes and pant legs were already wet from the jungle and the soft rain that must have come last night.

Once across the river, she marked her route south and strode out determinedly.

A rifle shot slammed past her head and she dropped to her knees. She had never been shot at before! It was terrifying. She trembled, waiting for the shot that would kill her. Within seconds, three Vietnamese in civilian clothes pointed rifles at her from six feet away.

She sat back on her heels and slowly lifted her hands. "American," she said.

The three chattered, and the one who seemed to be in charge walked up to her and felt her breasts. Automatically she slapped him. He slapped her back and all three men roared with laughter.

She held up her hands defensively and the man moved back. Slowly she realized they didn't know for sure if she were a man or a woman. He had simply used a pragmatic test.

A knife touched her back, penetrated her shirt and pricked at her skin. The man in front motioned for her to stand. She did. They stripped off her shirt, ripped off her G.I. bra and threw it away, then tied a short rope around her neck and bound her hands behind her back.

The boss of the trio pointed to the north and they walked away rapidly. She screeched at them to slow down, but they ignored her. They had a prize, and they were taking her somewhere to show her off.

She wasn't sure who they were. Viet Cong, probably. Where were they taking her? They had rifles that looked new, with the curved part that must hold the rounds. She thought those were the Russian automatic rifles the guys had talked about. They called them AKs.

What else? She was as tall as any of the three. At five-six she was maybe an inch taller than some. Two of them were in their thirties, she guessed, while the older one had to be over forty. But it was hard to tell.

One shouted something at her and jerked the rope. She staggered forward and the three laughed. They were on some kind of trail, and she now saw that it followed the river.

A half hour later, they came to a small village. The men shouted and whistled and soon the people in the village came out of huts and straw houses and stared, then laughed at her.

The men stopped and pointed at her, and yelled something she didn't understand. The women hooted and screeched at her. The men ran up and tried to touch her. When she turned away from one, another touched her shoulders, then her breasts. She kicked one in the crotch and he limped off, screaming at her.

A pistol shot slammed through the air and immediately quieted the sixty or seventy people. A man in a North Vietnamese Army uniform stepped from the largest hut. He put on his army hat, placed a riding crop under his right arm, and marched to the spot where the three held their prize.

For a moment the North Vietnamese officer looked at her blankly, then he gave the smallest of bows with his head only and turned and spoke rapidly with the three natives. For a moment they argued. Two of them gave up and wandered away into the crowd. The third, the older man, was furious. He kept shouting at the officer.

Slowly the captain drew his pistol and looked at the man. With a roar of anger the man dove forward, his rifle coming up to point at the North Vietnamese officer.

The rifle proved to be too cumbersome to lift, turn, and aim. Before the Viet Cong had his weapon pointed, the pistol snarled.

A bullet drove deep into the smaller man's chest. He staggered backward and fell, rolled over on his back, and let out one last breath as he died.

Rosalyn watched the murder, wide-eyed.

The officer motioned to two men standing nearby and they came forward, picked up the body, and carried it away. The officer holstered his pistol and stepped in front of Rosalyn.

"American?" he asked, his voice calm, polite.

"Yes." Rosalyn said, working desperately to stop her crying. She did somehow, and then returned his calm. Rosalyn wanted to scream at him and ask him how he could murder the villager in cold blood.

"You are a nurse?"

"Yes, an Army nurse. I save people from dying."

"Unlike me." His eyes twinkled. "My English is from American University in Tokyo. Two years."

"Your English is very good. Will you untie my hands and let me put my shirt on?"

"Yes, but do not run away."

"I wouldn't know which way to run."

"I am Captain Cao Khe." He cut the bindings around her wrist and shouted something at the men who had walked away. One returned with her fatigue shirt,

with her medical insignia and silver bar on the collar. She put it on at once, letting the green Army fatigue shirt hang outside her pants.

"It is my job to intercept the villagers with captured airmen and any prisoners and take charge of them." He looked at her a moment. "Come, you will walk behind me two paces. If you do not follow me, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Rosalyn nodded. At least she was covered, and her hands free. She had a little dignity. For now she would do as he said. For now. Perhaps later she could get his pistol.

She could fire it. Before she came to Nam she had used the Army pistol range and fired five hundred rounds.

He walked back to the largest hut in the village. It had a bamboo frame and walls and a roof covered with thatch. Inside, it was cool and clean, with two Western-style chairs and a small table.

"Some of the comforts of civilization, even here," he said softly, his eyes fixed on her body. "You are beautiful. You have good breasts and are slender. It would be a waste to send you to Hanoi." He thought about it and lifted a small glass of white liquid. The captain did not offer any to her.

He shouted out the door and soon food and tea were brought in, both hot and cold foods, and fruit. She sipped at the tea, green and with no sugar. Now she realized she was hungry. She ate the fruits and looked at the meat, but figured it was dog. She instead tried the baked fish, which was tender and delicious.

When they finished eating he nodded.

"No, I will not send you to Hanoi. You instead will go farther north. I will escort you myself, to be sure no harm comes to you. I have a friend who has been looking for a suitable... companion."

"I will not join some petty king's harem!"

Cao Khe laughed softly, his eyes glittering black pools. "Absolutely not. He is not Moslem. If he approves of you, you will become the General's only woman."

"So you're selling me to him!"

"Of course. Western women are extremely popular in the Orient."

"I'll be a slave?"

"Would you rather I turned you back to the men of the village?"

"No." She said it too quickly.

"It is early. We will ride a buffalo cart to the next village, where I have a motorcycle. It is much faster than a cart. There are back trails the bike will travel, well away from the South Vietnamese forces."

"They will catch us."

The captain poured himself another glass of the drink she guessed must be rice wine, and laughed. "No one will catch us, because I have here a package of great value. I served with the General before he had his problems. Now he holds me in high regard, and soon I will be a rich man."

"You're really going to sell me?"

"Of course. It would be stupid to give you away to my superiors in Hanoi. You are a once-in-a-lifetime find. Money in hand, as you Westerners say."

"You're disgusting."

“No!” Captain Khe roared, his face flushed. “You will not talk to me that way, American bitch! You will be quiet or have respect, or I will simply shoot you and forget the fortune.”

She started to reply but saw his hand near his pistol and kept quiet. She looked at the wall of woven bamboo covered with dried grasses. She shivered slightly and again the terrible truth came slamming down on her. She was a prisoner. She was in the hands of a crazy North Vietnamese who planned on selling her into sexual slavery.

For just a moment she wondered if it might not have been better if she hadn't slid out of that doomed chopper. If she had hung on, she would be delivered from all of the anguish and pain that she knew was ahead.

Every white woman in Vietnam had heard the stories, how white women were considered special to rich Orientals who could afford them. One nurse she knew had been offered three thousand dollars a month to desert the Army and live in Korea as a rich man's mistress. She had declined the offer, and transferred to where the Korean couldn't find her.

So it must be true. She would find out soon enough. As the captain drank, she stared out the door at the slow-moving river, and thought again about the casual way he had murdered the man. He had also just as casually said he would kill her if she didn't “behave.”

Could she kill this captain if she had to? For years she had been saving lives, patching up broken bodies, trying to heal people. Could she use her skills, her knowledge of the body, to take a life?

For a moment she thought she could. She looked down at her hands, which her nursing teacher said were too big to be good for surgery. That had been a lie. Her hands were strong, steady. She had specialized in operating room nursing just to prove the teacher wrong.

Now could those same hands pull the trigger on a gun and kill Captain Cao Khe?

She prayed that she would have the chance.

Captain Khe stood up and threw the empty wine bottle out an opening in the wall. Standing over her, the man leered, half drunk. He kept his right hand on the pistol pushed in his belt.

“What name do you have?” he asked, his words slurring only slightly.

“I am First Lieutenant Rosalyn James.”

“Rosalyn. Fancy, funny name. Rosalyn, I want to inspect the merchandise. See if I can get a big price for you.” She sat, frozen in the chair.

His hand slapped her from the side, pitching her to the floor.

“Get your clothes off, right now!” he thundered.

Rosalyn never got a chance to kill the North Vietnamese captain. The opportunity never presented itself. She had been raped, bound and gagged, then transported across endless trails to an unknown destiny.

She thought she had heard the captain mention something about China, and from the position of the sun and the length of the journey, Rosalyn decided that they were, indeed, heading for the Chinese border.



At last, after ten days of travel, the captain untied her. She welcomed the momentary freedom, stretching out her aching muscles. And then she saw it.

A fortress, etched into the side of a towering mountain. A huge castle of both Chinese and Western design loomed overhead, surrounded by a giant wall of gray rock.

The General's fortress.

Rosalyn shuddered. She had already been through enough agony and fear and terror to immunize her for life.

"Are you prepared to meet your new master?" Captain Khe snarled gleefully in her ear.

Rosalyn glared at him.

He frowned and said, quite matter-of-factly, "If you do not do exactly as I tell you, I am going to lose a fortune, and you, dear Lieutenant James, are going to lose your head."

## **PART II**

### **Redemption.**

## **Chapter 14**

Stone and his men checked in at a small hotel far from the tourist-trap section of Bangkok. It was called "Heaven's Rest," and had a mainly Thai clientele. The trio had come on their regular U.S. passports, so the embassy would soon know they were in town—that meant the CIA's Coleman would know, too. A meeting with Coleman was on the top of Stone's list.

The three settled into their rooms, and Stone told Hog and Terrance to check back every four hours. Things would be moving quickly.

For a CIA agent, Coleman was easy to find. He had become set in his ways, a creature of habit. Stone put on a lightweight tropical white jacket over a sport shirt, and made sure that the Beretta 92 DA automatic that spit out 9mm Parabellums was carefully hidden away in his shoulder leather.

It was late afternoon by this time, and Coleman would be playing the big man at a small native bar where he usually went to wind down and play V.I.P. with the Bangkok bar girls.

Stone sat at the bar and watched Coleman for a few minutes. He was alone, and the only other Caucasian in the small bar. He was a short, slender man, prematurely bald, but with a terrible black "rug" he used to hide his bald pate. His eyes bulged as he put his arms around two Thai girls. Coleman had been drinking heavily and was beginning to fade. Stone made sure there was no native muscleman babysitting Coleman, then he moved in quietly.

Coleman ordered another round of drinks for himself and the girls. When the waiter brought the drinks, Stone intercepted him, took the tray, and carried it to Coleman's table.

The CIA field man never even looked up. He threw two fifty-baht bills on the tray, and put his hand on one of the bargirl's breasts. She slapped him playfully, but did not move his hand.

Stone popped the tab on one of the cans of beer and poured it over Coleman's head.

The CIA man came up sputtering, knocked over the small table, and spilled a girl from his lap. She screeched and pulled her blouse together as she fell to the floor.

"Afternoon, Coleman," Stone snarled, his tone so deadly and level that Coleman's anger dissolved.

"What the hell? Stone? Thought you were in a federal lockup by now."

“Bad charges. Good lawyer. You have a serious need to take a piss. Let’s move it.”

Stone slid a small .38 automatic from the CIA agent’s front belt holster and pocketed it. He grabbed Coleman’s sweat-wet shirt and pulled him into the aisle, then steered him toward the men’s room.

Once inside the room, he backhanded Coleman hard, slamming him across the room.

“Christ’s sakes, easy, Stone! I can explain. I had orders to cut you off. Just doing my job.”

“That’ll be the day. You don’t even know what your job is. You owe me, slime.”

“Christ, Stone, take it easy!”

Stone slapped the man with his open palm and spun him across the room. He staggered and stumbled, skidded off the wall, and fell seat down in a flushing urinal.

Coleman screamed and jumped up. His hand darted for his left pocket. Stone’s four-inch honed blade was suddenly resting against Coleman’s right carotid.

“Give me any kind of an excuse, Coleman. I’d love to.”

Coleman eased his hand down, palm outward.

“Okay, you got a beef. But hell, you got free airfare home for a vacation.”

“Vacation’s over,” Stone snarled. “You’re going to *help* me this time, Coleman, or you’ll be eating your own balls. You read me?”

Coleman sobered up quickly. He nodded, leaning against the wall.

“Garrick, Pete Garrick,” said Stone. “CIA field agent up on the Chinese-Lao border. You’re going to tell me everything you know about him, who his contacts were, what the hell he was doing up there. I want chapter and verse. And don’t even spell a single word wrong.”

Coleman moved his handkerchief and stopped the blood flowing from his nose.

“Hell, you shouldn’t even know his *name*.”

“He died in my garage in California from a stab wound. Now tell me what you know.”

“Not much. Not a sensitive position. Older guy. Spoke Chinese and Lao like a native. Knew everyone up there. Tough area. Mountains so rugged the Chinese don’t try to climb them. High, sharp peaks. No minerals found there yet.”

“What did Garrick do up there?”

“Getting to it. Place is a hotbed of poppy. The old opium trade. Hundreds of tons of black opium come out of there. Refines into pure China white. He was trying to put the crunch on the trade. Wanted to bust up the operation at the source. That was his job, one by the agency that even a wise-ass like you could agree with.”

“How was he going to do that?”

“We had a covert thing working to fly in some choppers and spray the poppy fields with defoliant before they blossomed. Kill them worse than dead. No poppy... no opium. He was working on some bugs, too, that loved the poppy. Had a test going on some fields that ruined whole crops. The locals were not happy with our Mr. Garrick.”

“What locals? Any main man up there?”

Coleman laughed. “Sure is. What the hell you interested in that area for? We’ve never heard of any M.I.A. rumors from up there.”

"I got my reasons. Who's the kingpin?"

"Gent by the moniker of *the General*. From what Garrick could find out, the guy used to be a general in the North Vietnamese forces. Cut a wide swath. During the first part of the war, he got himself in trouble for selling part of his supplies to the South Vietnamese army. My guess is he held out on opium traffic profits from his superiors as well.

"Upshot was that they canned him. Tried to strip him of his men, but he took off six or seven years ago with a battalion, and went charging up into the hills."

"He still there?" Stone asked.

"Bigger than ever. This gent is taller than you are, heavier, loves to wear old Chinese armor and shields. Garrick was trying to get an exact location on him when the General's men caught up with him and chased him out of the country. Evidently they found him again in Los Angeles."

"How do you know all this about Garrick?"

"I was his control. I handled a lot of the nonsensitive people in this part of the world."

"Can you do it left-handed?"

"Left handed... ?"

"You tell me exactly where this General is holed up, or you'll have broken thumbs. *Capish*, Coleman?"

Sweat beaded on the partially bald head of the CIA man and trickled down his forehead.

"Christ, I told you nobody knows just where he is! At least we don't down here. It's on or near the Chinese-Lao border. Somebody told Garrick that the place was named the Hawk's Roost. There's a little town up there called Phnom Tay. Maybe five hundred people. It's about twenty miles from the border, and that's where Garrick had his information point. He spent a lot of time there during the last few months."

"What else do you have on Garrick? He have any contacts up there? Any names? I need to get to the General."

"No names I know of. Why you so interested?"

"I think the General is holding an M.I.A."

Coleman started to say something, but Stone pointed a finger at him.

"Little CIA man, you have not seen me. You do not know that I am here. This conversation never took place. You do not make out a report to your control or to the head man in Virginia. If you do anything like that, I'll come back and kill you. Now, do you fully understand? I'm still mad as hell at you, scumball!"

"Yes! Yes! Relax. I can roll with the punches. You're bad news, anyway."

"Shake on that?" Stone asked.

Surprise flowered on Coleman's face. He held out his right hand. Stone caught it, slid his hand up to Coleman's wrist, grabbed his elbow with his left hand, and slammed Coleman's forearm across Stone's knee as he rammed it upward.

Both bones in Coleman's forearm broke with a snap, and white bone pierced the man's sallow skin. Blood surged.

Coleman's scream ricocheted around the small bathroom for five seconds, then he passed out.

“That’s for those Lao freedom fighters you had butchered,” Stone told the unconscious heap in the smelly corner.

He left the men’s room and the bar at once and crawled into the battered but reliable Toyota pickup he had rented.

Driving to the far side of town, he parked and walked two blocks, doubled back, and leaned against a wall for five minutes, watching everyone who passed him or even started to walk down the street.

At last he was satisfied. No one had tailed him. He walked halfway down the block past a laundromat and a tiny shop that sold only fresh fish, and slipped into a small pagoda next door. It had the look of being unused.

He pushed through a door and moved slowly down a dimly lit center aisle, as the usual pungent burning incense seeped into his lungs. As his eyes adjusted, he could see there was no one in the room. He walked down a central aisle of benches, keeping one hand on the automatic and watching the door at the far end.

He had stopped beside the altar when suddenly in the back of the room, he heard a familiar voice. It was that of An Khom, an arms dealer and trader in rare commodities. An Khom bowed slightly, peering directly at Stone. He had never known how old the arms expert was, but a guess would be between seventy and ninety. Stone had dealt with him from the very start of his M.I.A. rescue work.

“Ah, Mr. Stone. As always, I welcome you to my humble place of commercial enterprise. Please come in and have tea.”

An Khom looked older this time; his skin was more wrinkled, his white hair sparser, but the well-trimmed beard was the same. The old Thai smiled and brewed the tea. They were both silent during the short ceremony. When the green tea was served, Stone spoke first.

“I have heard of a man on the Lao-Chinese border named the General. You have intelligence about him?”

An Khom stared past Stone and his face softened. For a moment he could have been a man of twenty. Stone turned and saw An Ling standing in the doorway in a clinging Thai dress that emphasized her slender figure and her delicate skin tones. She smiled, went past her father, and kissed Stone’s cheek.

“Welcome back to Bangkok. It is our wish that you have your evening meal with us in our unworthy home.” She smiled, and Stone remembered how he and his men had saved An Ling’s life when bandits attacked their home.

He smiled at her. She was a little over eighteen, the youngest child of An Khom’s old age, and his personal favorite.

“I’m sorry about dinner, but your father and I have much business to discuss. Time is precious to me right now. I promise another time for sure.”

Her face crumbled, showing her disappointment. Then she brightened. “Before you leave Bangkok this time, you must keep your promise. Father, tell the beautiful American he must come to dinner.”

An Khom turned and motioned the girl back through a curtain of finely strung beads over another door.

He slowly shook his head. “In my day such a forward young woman would be severely disciplined.” He chuckled. “But I am an old man and she is the joy of my remaining years. Perhaps you could have a meal with us. She always asks.”

"I hope so, when I return. Now, we were talking about a man known as the General."

"The General is not a good man to do business with. He is independent of any nation. Some say he has his own kingdom, high in the mountains."

"The Hawk's Roost," Stone said softly.

An Khom looked up quickly. "Inscrutable I am not. You do surprise me, Mr. Stone. Not many Westerners know of the Hawk's Roost. Very bad."

"Have you heard of his having a white woman there?"

"No, but it would not be common knowledge. Such matters for him would be most private."

"How can I get there?"

"It is a long, dangerous trip. No refueling points. They would have to be set up. The area is in a point of Laos that extends northward, into China."

The old arms dealer pulled out a map of Thailand and Laos. It was a large-scale, detailed map of the two nations, nearly two feet square. His ancient thumb pressed on Bangkok near the southern end of his nation almost on the Gulf of Siam.

"We are here." His finger traced a long trip north to the farthest point in Thailand, to a town named Chiang Rai.

Then it moved to the right across an arm of Laos, across a spit of China where it surged south, and then back into Laos. His finger stopped there.

"It is over two hundred and fifty miles from Chiang Rai to the general area you are talking about. High mountains. Bad wind currents, sudden downdrafts. Thin air for a helicopter to fly in. Very, very risky."

"But couldn't it be done?"

"Logistics," An Khom said. "Fuel supply. I have two birds available. Very hard. Two hundred fifty miles. My biggest chopper only have range of 300 miles."

"What load could we take?"

"Must take all you need. Guns, explosives, food, everything. Very heavy."

"Can it be done, An Khom?"

The old Thai was either working up the price, or honestly concerned. For the moment, Stone couldn't tell which. He watched the old arms dealer's fingers flying over the pad of paper. At last he looked up.

"Maybe," he said softly.

"Not good enough, An Khom." Stone told him about the tip on the possible M.I.A. and who she was. "She's a special lady, An Khom. I was going to marry her. If my information is right, she's been hidden away up there for all these years! I'll risk it all for the chance to bring her out."

"Not risk all. Must be better than fifty-fifty chance to get her home. What good you both die when you run out of fuel?"

An Khom tore the sheet off the pad and began working again. At last he looked up. "Have it down to a 55 get back and 45 not get back. Odds good enough for you?"

"Spell it out for me, An Khom."

He pointed to a list of character writing symbols that made no sense to Stone.

"First, light on weapons. Must take in minimum of weapons and no explosives. Must capture weapons and ammunition from the enemy on the target site."

“Next, must take in enough fuel to fly 225 miles back home. This mean set up refueling point twenty-five miles from target. Fly there, leave off fuel, fly on to target.

“Then hide bird until pickup time, get passengers, fly to refuel spot, take on aviation fuel, fly out to Chiang Khong. Chiang Khong twenty-five miles closer to target than Chiang Rai.”

He looked up and grinned, showing stumps of teeth and a few shiny bright ones, obviously caps.

“An Khom think can be done.”

“One day trip. We take no food, blankets, any of that survival gear. We cut our personal weapons to essentials. We make room for all the petrol we can carry. We’ll be a flying bomb going in.”

“When?” An Khom asked.

“Sooner the better.”

“First I talk to man who knows region. He has been to Hawk’s Roost.”

“Sounds like one of those fortresses built on a hill.”

“On cliff, on pinnacle. An Khom tell you tomorrow. Bring list of needed weapons at noon, at Golden Princess Bar. We meet there.”

Stone faded out a back door that led to an alley.

Back at the hotel, he called a briefing with Loughlin and Wiley, to go over the scenario with them.

“I know it’s not a good report. We have about a fifty-fifty chance to get our chopper in there and back out without running dry on fuel. And who knows what kind of opposition we’ll run into once we get to the Hawk’s Roost.”

Stone watched them. Neither one said a word. “Here’s the capper. We have to travel light to make more room for more petrol on board. Here’s a list of what each of us can take, including ammo. We’ll have to count on getting weapons and ammo from the other side somewhere.”

“Christ, you begging to get us killed?” Hog roared. “We got to have our tools, damn it!”

Terrance looked at the list. “Can’t be done, mate. Hell, we don’t have more than a pin to prick what must be a battalion of troops. How in bloody hell can we do that?”

“I told you it would be touch and go. First we have to make sure our chopper can get back. Then we figure out how to accomplish our mission with as few weapons as possible.”

“Don’t like it, not one bit!” Hog snapped.

The next day, at noon, they met with An Khom.

“We have better helicopter. Cost is double. It have plenty of fuel for 500-mile trip and all weapons you need. Also take along extra man to protect chopper while waiting. Cost twenty thousand American dollars a day.”

“Sold,” Stone said. “Wrap it up.”

Twenty minutes later they walked through a shop that sold fresh vegetables. Behind a curtain they went down into a basement, across it to more steps, then up on the far side of the block to a warehouse with no outside entrance.

The building was laid out neatly, with tables for small weapons flanked by cartons of ammunition. Larger weapons were on the floor, and at the far end of the building sat an operating, armored personnel carrier.

"You've expanded your inventory," Stone said, looking around.

Four Thais worked over weapons, cleaning some, assembling others, packing and shipping orders.

"This is more fucking like it!" Hog picked up an Uzi, slamming in an empty magazine. "Yeah, just like Christmas!"

While Hog and Terrance began selecting the tools they would use on the assault, An Khom took Stone aside.

"I talk with man who was at the General's Hawk's Roost. He bring bad news. The roost is 500 feet high, on jutting tower of rock. The Chinese call it *Blood Mountain*. Only way up is by elevator basket. Strongly defended. General controls entire area around Roost."

Stone leaned forward and said, "We'll do a vertical assault, and drop in on him from the chopper."

"Not possible," An Khom said sadly. "General has dozens of shoulder-fired, ground-to-air missiles. Small ones, but right to kill helicopter. General got small missiles to defend against Chinese helicopters. Sorry with bad news."

"I'm damn sorry myself," Stone growled, wondering how he, Loughlin, and Wiley could tackle the impossible—but knowing they would.

## Chapter 15

It was a long afternoon for Stone and his two men. They went through the process of outfitting themselves for the mission. They would need two kinds of weapons and gear. One would be for the infiltration through enemy troops and civilians, so they could get to the base of the Hawk's Roost.

The second batch of weapons, explosives, and equipment would need to be carried easily, so they could fight their way up the series of baskets that would take them 500 feet up the sheer rock wall.

They chose the Russian-made AK-47 automatic rifle with 7.62mm slugs and 30-round magazines. They would be able to get AK-47s in Laos, from the Viets, and perhaps even the General's men used them. They could pick up ammo from the enemy.

Silently Stone thanked the Russian, Kalashnikov, who created the weapon and the 800 rounds a minute it could stutter out. He moved on to another table and selected the Ingram M-10 chopper, a machine pistol that spit 1200 rounds a minute. It was compact, lightweight, and a great close-in weapon. Each of the three men would carry one on a sling round his neck.

"Primer cord?" Stone asked, surprised.

"Yes. Hard to find. Expensive, but good." An Khom watched Stone. "Bonus, free to you. Take what you need."

"Might just do that," Hog said picking up a coil of twenty feet and putting it with his stack of goods.



They revised their equipment list as they went. With a good chopper ride in and out, there would be no weight problem. Hog found a .357 Magnum and Terrance chose a hideout, .32 automatic.

“With the Ingram and the AK, I should have plenty of firepower, old man,” he said to Hog, as the heavy man laughed at what he called a pussy weapon.

“Things get tight, I just might find a need for a piece hidden away.”

They estimated the amount of ammo they would need, added as much C-4 plastic explosive as Stone thought they could take safely, and then put in the needed pencil timer-detonators. There was no room for the radio detonation kit that Terrance wanted.

“By the time we get there, the General is going to know it,” Stone said. “We won’t be able to surprise anyone.”

Hog wanted to take three LAWs, but even before he picked up one, he knew it would be impossible to carry up the mountain.

“We’ve got to think streamlined,” Stone cautioned. “Remember, anything you pick out, you have to move in your pack or on your body. We won’t have any mules.”

As they made their final choices and weighed them on a scale, An Khom was busy in a small room to one side. He returned smiling.

“All arranged. We fly to Chiang Khong at ten tomorrow morning. Okay?”

“Sooner the quicker,” Stone said, looking around. “You guys satisfied?”

“No .44 AutoMags?” Hog asked.

“Hard to find,” An Khom explained.

Hog shrugged. “What the fuck? Who wants to live forever?”

Stone arranged for An Khom to deliver the goods the next morning, to a small airport on the east side of town. Stone and his men would drive there for the 10:00 a.m. liftoff.

“So, I’d say we have one more night in town before we take off into the bloody brush again,” Loughlin remarked.

“About the size of it,” Hog brayed. “Last night I ate up a storm, tonight I’m gonna find me about three little ladies who aren’t bashful—and see what they can do.”

“Three?” Terrance asked. “That sounds about right. A hundred and fifty pounds for each one of them.”

Hog snorted. “You weird Englishmen never did know what to do with your women.”

“We know, old man, we know. We don’t want to let you chaps find out about it and copy our style. Not that some of you could bring your performance level up that high.”

“Christ, I think I was just insulted,” Hog yelled.

“You guys need some action,” Stone said watching them. “I promise you some the day after tomorrow. Try to keep it together. Figure a bill, An Khom.”

An Khom gave Stone another slip of paper. It showed a figure of \$12,345.00.

“That was your last trade-in,” he said smiling. “Just need difference now. Chopper pay later.”

Stone took a money belt from under his shirt and began counting out hundred-dollar bills. When Stone got to ninety-three of them, An Khom held up his hand. "Enough," he said.

Stone nodded, gave Hog and Terrance two one hundred-dollar bills each. "So you won't run short," he said. "Now I've got some heavy planning to do. I just hope like hell we can figure out a good way to get to the top of that damn mountain where the General is perched."

Stone drove his men back to the hotel, where they split up. Stone had a long hot shower, and was delighted that the hot water lasted as long as he wanted it to. Somebody had slipped up somewhere.

After his shower, he wished the hotel had room service, but since it didn't, he decided he'd go to a restaurant he had spotted that morning. Before that, he put in two hours working over the maps An Khom had given him. One showed the area around the town way up there, and another showed in more detail the land between that town and the approximate China-Laos border.

It was true. Not even the mapmakers could tell exactly where the border was. Those mountains might never have been surveyed. One of these days, they would take choppers in there and do a proper survey and then redraw the maps.

What he saw discouraged him. Peaks rising more than nine thousand feet, deep valleys that looked less than a mile wide. Not much in the way of local population was shown, not even villages. No roads, only buffalo trails, where the big animals serve as pack animals.

Stone dropped the maps. The attack would have to be improvised, made up on the spot, after some decent recon and with all the intel he could put together.

Satisfied that he couldn't do much more, he decided to have a long, satisfying dinner and come back for an hour of heavy exercise to keep his body in shape for the next two or three days of rugged, live-or-die combat.

He slid into a light cotton shirt with an open weave, and pushed the Beretta 92 DA in his waist holster, letting the outside shirttail cover it completely. He slid a four-inch stiletto-type blade into his boot, with the handle just under his cuff, and walked out the door. His moneybelt was in place, and he was getting hungry. He was trying to decide whether he would go for seafood or vegetarian.

The room clerk nodded as Stone walked up to him. He had made special arrangements for their rooms to be guarded whenever they were out. Stone slid two five-hundred-baht notes to the clerk, who nodded and gestured to a large Thai sitting in a chair in the small lobby. The man vanished up to the second floor to guard Stone's room.

Outside, the late afternoon humidity hit him like a wet towel. He moved across the street into the shade, and was about to continue when he felt that combat tenseness at the back of his neck.

His hair didn't stand on end, but something was wrong. He paused, scanning the busy street scene around him with a renewed sensitivity to danger.

A high-powered rifle cracked from across the street and a baht copper pan behind Stone's head developed a round hole in it.

Stone dived to the floor of the shop behind him, rolled once, then crawled under a table to the back aisle. Doubled over, he ran for the rear entrance. As with so

many of the small shops, it was barely thirty feet deep, and a door opened on an alley that was piled with garbage and trash.

With the Beretta in his clenched fist, he slid behind a pile of thick wooden boxes that kept trash from a rear wall, and moved so he had a clear view of the whole alley from between the inch-thick slats of the boxes.

A door down the alley to his right opened, and a tall, thin Thai burst through, crouched, and whipped a handgun both ways, expecting to find a target.

Less than ten seconds later, another man plowed through a door at the other end of the alley. He was large, and American.

"Donner," Stone whispered. Donner was the brain-dead hulk who supposedly was the number-one muscle man for Alan Coleman.

Figures, Stone decided. Maybe Coleman didn't like to have his arm broken. Next time it would be his legs. Both of them.

The big guy waved at the smaller one and they began to move slowly toward each other. Stone was between them. The Thai would get to him first. Stone moved deeper into the wooden crates, which formed a stack ten feet long. He found a point where the searchers would have to look around a ninety-degree corner.

"Where'n hell did he go?" the American called.

The Thai said something Stone didn't understand. Then the Thai took his first step into the pile of wooden boxes, and peered around the corner.

Stone held the Beretta by the barrel and brought down the butt of the weapon on the Oriental's head with a solid *thunk*. The man went down without a sound. Stone grabbed the U.S. Army .45 automatic the Thai had carried, and looked out the way the man had come in.

No one showed in the alley. Donner had gone to ground somewhere.

Stone waited. He was in no rush. Donner had the contract, and had to perform. After five minutes, a woman came from a store to the right, dumped some trash and went back in.

It was another five minutes before Stone saw a trash barrel move slightly twenty feet up the alley. Then the big man dove away from it in a charge that carried him a dozen feet up the alley before Stone could get his weapon raised.

Stone's first shot caught the big man in the hip, and before Stone could be sure of a second shot, the CIA muscle rolled through a doorway and was gone. Stone started to step out from the boxes when two small Thais with handguns ran from the same door where Donner had vanished. They both were coming toward Stone.

One of them rolled behind boxes on the far side of the alley; the second one jumped behind the metal trash barrel where Donner had been hiding.

Moving time. Stone came storming from the pile of boxes, a pistol in each hand. He fired two shots at each of the hiding places as he ran backwards, then darted into an open door. He stopped and watched his back trail.

As soon as the first hoodlum moved toward him, Stone cut him down with a leg shot, the big .45 slamming into his upper thigh, driving it out from under him and dropping him into the alley garbage. The other man didn't move.

Stone turned to find a wild-eyed woman nursing a baby. She clutched the child to her breast as Stone hurried past her into the store itself. It was a fish market. He started down one side of it, toward the open front of the building, but found two youths facing him.

Both carried curved swords about two feet long and razor sharp. Stone still held both automatics in his hands. He motioned with the weapons. Both youths laughed.

Darting to the side, Stone pushed a table of fish over on the pair and jumped a counter into the street. He slid the weapons out of sight in his belt and hoofed off down the unpaved street.

Dinner was delicious, if not uneventful.

He had some of the best lobster he could remember eating, as well as some of the local beer and special rice flour bread.

Using a roundabout route, he got back to his hotel and watched the side entrance for several minutes before deciding it was clean. He walked in casually and up to his room where he found the big Thai sleeping against his door. The moment Stone's foot hit the hallway of the second floor, the guard was awake and an eight-inch knife glistened in his hand.

Stone walked up to him so the Thai could recognize him. The man stood. Stone took out his wallet and produced two one-hundred-baht bills.

"Stay here. Guard tonight," Stone said. The man stared at him not understanding.

The room clerk hurried up and translated. The big man nodded, let Stone into the room, then sat down outside as Stone closed the door and locked it.

It wasn't that heavy a door. Someone with a few hundred more baht might convince the big man to quit his post. After all, this was Thailand, and already he had been attacked three times in the last two hours.

He took a quick, cold shower, then lay down on top of the sheet in his shorts, with the borrowed .45 in his right hand, and the Beretta under his pillow.

## Chapter 16

In the past thirteen years, she had never given up hope.

The General, the only term by which her captor was known, had proven to be a simple, coarse brute with a keen native intelligence. A cruel, sadistic, cynical, modern-day warlord.

During the war, the General and his highly organized paramilitary gang had plundered villages of both North and South Vietnam, as well as Laos and China. The General sold guns to the Viet Cong, medical supplies to the NVA, and heroin to American servicemen.

Her life at the Hawk's roost had been hell, yes, but she had endured.

She was the General's prisoner, and she was there for one purpose. Over the years, she had become more a fixture than his mistress. To keep herself occupied, more than for any other reason, she had made him see the benefits of establishing a small clinic to care for the ills and injuries occasionally besetting an operation of his size.

She had, in fact, had fewer and fewer demands placed upon her over the years. He now visited her private chambers perhaps once a month, sometimes less, for

perfunctory, almost impersonal sex. Other than that, she had been left to herself, with near full run of the remote mountain fortress, and treated with some deference by those of the General's command. She had no friends, except possibly for Tui, her "hand-maiden" of the last six years—a young Chinese peasant girl. She did have access to a well-stocked library, with its full wall of books in English. A carryover, she was sure, from whomever the Hawk's Roost had belonged to previously.

Her gilded cage consisted of three large rooms with windows opening on the garden. The rooms had a combination of modern and antique furnishings that had proved to be comfortable and practical. One room was ancient, with the original stone on the walls and floor. It was exactly as the first builders of the fortress had left it. Only a few pieces of furniture had been added.

The second chamber was a living room with modern upholstered furniture. The floor had a thick rug and the walls were plastered and painted to look much like a western-style room.

Her bedroom was luxurious, with a beautiful canopied bed. It had walls draped with silk and satin fabric to make it look like the inside of a desert tent, the closets filled with clothes that had been tailored to fit her exactly from measurements they had taken. There were clothes of the latest fashions she had seen in magazines, as well as a pair of bib overalls, jeans, slacks, and blouses, dozens of them.

There was a real garden on top of the fortress, and she saw how impregnable the Hawk's Roost was. It covered the entire top of the peak, which had to be more than a quarter of a mile square. There were vegetable gardens, a small grove of fruit trees, and flowers.

A tall wall circled the entire complex, and she watched as elevator baskets moved up and down its steep face almost without pause, bringing up huge loads of produce, grain, food, and, at times, large cardboard boxes that had been ordered especially by the General from Tokyo.

She took care of herself with a strict regimen of exercise and hoped she wasn't kidding herself in thinking she had still kept her looks. The years had hardly been kind, but this, she thought, did not show in her face.

She had not lost her mind, or her hope, because she kept her mind active, and because of her memories of a man named Mark Stone.

She wondered what had happened to the man she had once hoped to marry, so many lifetimes ago. She wondered if she would ever see Stone again. The only way she could bear to be touched by the General was to close her eyes and somehow try to imagine that it was Mark she was with...

Over the past thirteen years, Rosalyn James had pieced together enough bits of information to understand that the General presently ran an extensive network in the opium trade, and was dealing as well in the acquisition and sale of valuable intelligence information, on behalf of any number of interested and paying parties. He had connections with the KGB, the CIA, and dozens of drug dealers and black marketeers.

She had also learned of his exact troop strength and defenses.

There were usually about two hundred men living on the Roost. A hundred and fifty of those were soldiers, who were rotated on a six-month basis. After the Roost duty, they went to the valley below, to supervise the raising of the poppy plants

and production of the opium, then its transportation and sale. They also worked running the several food farms below.

Not that any of this did her any good.

In thirteen years, she had not left the General's mountain-top fortress, and no opportunity to escape had ever presented itself, despite her always looking for some way, any way, out of her hell on earth.

The General did not beat her. He rarely spoke to her. But early on, when she had first learned of his heroin factory at the Hawk's Roost, angry outrage had gotten the better of her common sense, and she had witnessed a side, the true side, of this man-beast who had bought her, and she would never forget.

When she had learned that opium was made into heroin at the Hawk's Roost, Rosalyn had closed down the clinic, storming into the General and throwing his medical books at his feet.

"Your heroin is killing hundreds of thousands of people all over the world!" she ranted. "I won't be a part of it! I'd rather let the soldiers and workers here die than see them produce poison to make innocent people die!"

Without a word, he dragged her into a part of the castle that she had never seen before.

Over the very center of the fortress, there had been in olden times a powder magazine. It was dug deep into a crevice which had been blasted and enlarged and then covered over into a large room far below the top of the land mass.

Since the early days, the powder magazine had been moved and the lower basement had been converted into a discipline chamber. Now it was a full-blown torture dungeon. When the General let loose of her hand, they stood at the bottom of the steps. In front of them was a medieval rack that could be used to tear a human being apart, one centimeter at a time.

Rosalyn stared.

A Laotian man lay on the infernal device, his wrists held by chains over his head. Both feet were similarly bound to heavy steel posts. A soldier swung a large crank one notch, a heavy gear moved, and the chains on the man's wrists stretched an inch upward.

The man screamed until he passed out.

Rosalyn looked away, wanting to scream herself. The General caught her hand and forced her to walk beside him as he inspected twelve stations in the torture dungeon. Four more men hung on iron rings fastened to the wall. Two were in dire danger from a giant pendulum that swung forward and back. A sharp blade attached to the bottom of the pendulum cleared the men's chests by a fraction of an inch. Each time the men failed to answer a question, the platform they rested on was cranked up a notch and the blade came closer.

Again she looked away. The General dragged her to the next station, where a man kept a fire blazing. Various branding irons were kept white hot for instant use on a victim who hung on iron rings. The interrogator shook his head at the General. The man now hanging on the rings had died.

She broke away and ran for the steps, crying all the way to the top. A guard stopped her. By the time the General came up the steps, she had recovered.

That night, she told Tui about her trip to the dungeon. The Chinese girl nodded. She had taken that same trip, years ago.

“It is his way of warning us,” she told Rosalyn. “It would be best if you went back to your clinic. The people here need that. And you need it, Lady Rosalyn, or you will go mad.”

So she had reopened the clinic.

Time had dragged on until that day, now little more than a year ago, when a lieutenant in the General’s defense force, Lu Fang, was brought in on a stretcher. He was about thirty, and had been injured seriously by a falling basket. Rosalyn examined him, and gave him a shot of morphine. He needed an operation. She had ordered some basic equipment months ago, but had not had the courage to try anything herself. Now she must—or Lu Fang would die.

She set it up, had Tui come in to help her, and made the field as sterile as possible. He had two ribs that were pressing on his heart. One was broken, and would penetrate the heart and end his life with any unusually deep breath.

She used ether as an anesthetic, and worked quickly, cutting his chest, pulling the ribs back in place, and bracing them in place with small splints. She closed up the incision and watched him for forty-eight hours, without sleeping more than five minutes at a time.

Lu Fang developed a fever which she stabilized and reduced, and then at the end of the second day he had passed the point where infection might develop. She had saved him. Lu Fang smiled at her and practiced his English.

“Thank you, doctor,” he said.

She smiled. That “thank you” had been the first anyone had ever given her there. After that, she worked with him on his English. It was two months before he was ready to go back to duty, and by that time she had been so attracted to the young Laotian soldier that she had waited for her chance, and one night locked the clinic door, turned out all of the lights, and gently seduced Lu Fang.

She had been lonely, and a little crazy—or maybe, she told herself later, very crazy. And he had seemed, well, somehow different, more sensitive, more decent, than the others, or at least that’s what she told herself when she found someone she thought maybe she could feel human again with after all these years.

They were lovers after that. Stolen moments. Brief times together in the clinic. Delightful interludes in a secluded corner of the garden.

Then one night Lu Fang admitted to her that there was the chance for takeover by a rebel faction in the guard force. It was just developing, and it could take a year to organize and work out a plan.

It was a hope. A dream she could hang on to, look forward to.

Then one terrible week, the General uncovered the plot to overthrow him. Lu Fang was not detected, but twenty-one men from the guard were executed in the dungeon. Their screams could be heard all over the fortress.

Lu Fang did not even talk to Rosalyn for a month. Then the General went to the coast on a secret trip to meet with his opium buyers. Twice Lu Fang stayed in Rosalyn’s room with her. Secretly they planned either an overthrow or an escape.

By then Rosalyn had been at the Hawk’s Roost for over twelve years.

Slowly, quietly, Lu Fang gained converts. He killed two of his band who had taken money to be informers for the General. As the weeks dragged on, Rosalyn and Lu Fang met more often, at times in public, but more often alone in seclusion.

She told him time and again that she loved him, and in a way she did. But she admitted to herself that she was using him. She was at the point where she would do anything to get away from her prison.

At last Lu Fang said he was almost ready. The thirteenth year had passed. Rosalyn had decided long ago that if Mark Stone were still alive, he must have forgotten her. He would have heard about the chopper crash and a team would have reconed the site and declared them all K.I.A.

But still, she had a desperate desire to get out, to get home, to see America again. Over the years, from sheer necessity, she had picked up the language and now spoke it like a native, without an accent. At times she felt her English had suffered.

Now she crouched behind flowering shrubs in the farthest point of the garden and kissed Lu Fang. He held her tightly for a moment, and whispered in her ear.

“We are close! I need only two key men and we will be ready to strike. Otherwise, it would be suicide—worse, it would be death on the rack.”

“You must be sure. Another few days or weeks will not matter if we win.”

“We will win. The evil bastard will be blown right out of his bed over the edge of the cliff. He will have two minutes to think about dying as he falls to the rocks below!”

“His elite guard?” she asked.

“All taken care of, Rosalyn. I command them. We all will swing to the rebel side at once, taking over key centers and control points.”

“A date. Can we set a possible date for the uprising?”

Lu Fang rubbed his chin, looked into her eyes and smiled. Then leaning forward, he kissed her. “I can hardly believe that you are mine! That soon we can tell everyone!”

“A date, Lu Fang?”

“We should be ready in a week, that would be July 12. Yes, we will try to make that our target date, July 12.”

They heard a guard coming and knelt lower, behind the bushes. He held her in his arms, and she shivered. He patted her shoulder. When the guard was past, she saw him put a knife back in a boot scabbard.

She watched him closely. “If he had found us, would you have used the knife?”

“Of course. Even though he is one of my trusted men, he might forget himself and shout a warning. Then all would be lost. The military commander must always be ready to sacrifice one man or a few men to achieve an important victory, or even to win a desired objective.”

“What about me, Lu Fang. Would you sacrifice me to win the overthrow?”

The slender, young Laotian shook his head vigorously. “No, no, of course not! You are most of the reason I am risking my life to dethrone the General! I will give up my own life, if I must, to make your existence easier.”

It was much later when Rosalyn went back to her room. Tui knocked and came in, as was their agreement. Tui frowned slightly, lifted her brows, and then came to Rosalyn.

“Be careful. If the General suspected his woman was having an affair with another man, he would put her on the rack until she confessed. I don’t know



where you've been. But, my dear friend, be extremely careful. There are spies and informers everywhere!"

## Chapter 17

Stone looked out the window of the small plane as it circled the Chiang Rai landing strip. An Khom had met them at the Bangkok airport on schedule. The equipment and weapons had been loaded into the fixed wing four-seat craft An Khom had arranged.

The flight to the northern Laotian city had been routine. They would meet the chopper pilot here and fly to Chiang Khong, where they would refuel the big bird before the last leg of the trip.

Routine.

Twenty minutes later, in the corrugated metal hanger, Stone glared at a small Laotian who could speak some English.

"What do you mean the helicopter isn't here? We paid for it."

"Mr. Samersom say he be a little late. In big gambling game."

"Christ, how can the fucker do this to us?" Hog bellowed. "What the hell is going on here?"

Stone concentrated on the Laotian. It wasn't the manager's fault. "How can we find this Samersom?"

"In town."

"Now see here, my good man," Loughlin sailed in smoothly. "You must know where he is. This is bloody important to us and we might just get unhappy with you, if you don't do everything you can to help us. Do I make myself clear?"

"In town. Gamble. Maybe I take you there." The small man was sweating. He wiped his forehead and watched Hog cleaning his fingernails with a foot-long fighting knife.

Hog pointed the weapon at the small man. "Be damn friendly of you all to do that little trick for us—like right pronto."

The Laotian nodded, turned, and walked out of the hanger toward a tired Datsun sedan. The four of them crowded in, and the Laotian drove past the end of the grass strip, through a thick patch of heavy jungle growth, and along a narrow road toward the small town.

Just inside the first scattering of buildings, the Laotian swung the Datsun off the main track into a side street, and careened past chickens and children in the dirt lane. One shopkeeper had to pull back his cart of bananas and fruit to avoid being run over.

The Datsun stopped before a small restaurant that was closed. All four men got out, and the Laotian led the way to the back of the establishment, knocked four times, then once more. The door opened a crack, then wider. Hog grabbed the panel, jerked it forward, and glared down at the Laotian woman who stood there.

Their guide chattered with the woman a moment, then pushed her aside and strode forward down a long hallway and opened the last door.

Inside was a kind of hot tub, Oriental style. Five Laotian men and one blond, pale American guy sat in the steaming water. Floating in the center was a heavy wooden, laminated chopping block. On it lay a foot-long meat cleaver. The men didn't look up when the strangers entered. They were playing some kind of a game with ivory pieces about the size of dominoes.

The men played their pieces on the tiled sides of the tub. Each one had a turn, which produced immediate reactions from the other men. It meant nothing to Stone. Then the American played for the second time. All of the players now watched the blond man who looked skyward and then turned over a tile. The five Laotians playing the game hooted and howled in delight.

The American stood up in the steaming water, showing that he wore only jockey shorts, and reached for a revolver lying on the dry portion of the tile. He opened the cylinder. There was only one bullet in the six chambers. He closed the cylinder so all could see the round was still enclosed, and spun the cylinder once. When it stopped, he spun it again, and the other five players nodded.

Without looking at the weapon, the American lifted it, aimed at the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. The .38 revolver fired, and the men around the table gasped, then became somber and intently watchful.

The American who had fired the revolver laid it on the tile, stepped forward in the pool and put his left hand on the floating chopping block. Now Stone could see that he had only three fingers on his left hand. The smallest one was gone.

The loser picked up the cleaver with his right hand and extended his ring finger on top of the chopping block. The rest of his fingers were folded back in the water away from the floating wooden block.

He said something in Thai, then stared at each of the men around the table. Slowly, each man in turn closed his eyes, then held his clenched fist with his thumb either up or down. When all had completed the ritual, the American with the cleaver spoke sharply a Laotian word and all eyes opened.

He counted with the cleaver. Four thumbs pointed downward, only one up.

With a resounding scream the young American holding the cleaver brought it down sharply, severing his ring finger between the first and second joints. Blood spurted into the hot water.

The woman who had brought them rushed into the room with a kit of supplies, quickly thrust the stump of the severed finger into a powder, then wrapped it tightly so it could not bleed anymore.

The severed finger was retrieved from the water and carried by the other five to a display board, where it was ceremoniously fastened to a board that had a dozen other fingers on it, most shriveled and shrunken with time.

"Not really my kind of game," Loughlin winced.

"Which one is our pilot?" Stone asked the Laotian they came with. He pointed to the American who had just cut off his own finger.

"Damn good planning," Stone grunted.

"He be fine this afternoon," the Laotian grinned. "Woman good nurse! We talk!"

A half hour later they met the American. He came to the Datsun. He had only a small bandage on his finger and a quart bottle of potent rice wine in the other hand. It was already half gone. Stone took the bottle and glared at the American.

“Where the hell is your chopper? Not to mention your fingers. You have a flying job today.”

The blond man, whom Stone figured was about thirty-five, looked up and snorted. “So sue me, wiseass.”

“How did you get into a stupid game like that?”

“By proving I could play,” the American shot back. “My name is Vic Samersom, and I can fly anything that moves through the air except a damn bumblebee. I’m ready to leave anytime you are.”

“Where’s your chopper?”

“Safe and under guard. You didn’t think I’d leave it out at Willy’s little landing strip did you? The Viets would have it blown up in two days.”

“What about your hand? Can you fly?”

“Shit! I’ve flown tougher missions than this half-dead, shot full of holes, and leaking blood. You really going to Blood Mountain?”

“Damn right.”

“Let’s talk.”

“Let’s see your bird,” Stone demanded.

Twenty minutes later they pulled green canvas off a chopper sitting near a thicket of bamboo on the edge of the small town.

Stone laughed. “What the hell is it?”

“It’s the last three years of my life. An old French-made bird that I’ve put back together. Spare parts, cannibalized parts, anything that’ll work. Better than new. Top speed fully loaded’s about ninety-five miles an hour. Better than climbing mountains on all fours and your ass.”

“What about altitude?”

“I’ve been up over ten thousand feet. She doesn’t like it up there, but if that’s where the job is, that’s where she’ll go.”

“Give me a ride,” Stone said.

When the bird touched down a half hour later, Stone made his final plans.

“We’ll take off from here at 0330, which will put us near the target at just about daylight. Then you’ll have a half hour to hide your bird.”

“Yeah. Done it before. Oh, you pick up my insurance for a month on the bird. Three thousand.”

“Done. How’s the finger?”

“The part that isn’t there is itching,” Samersom said. “Damnedest thing. The other one didn’t do that.”

“No sweat flying?”

“Hell, no. We set up a meeting time, forty-eight hours after I let you off, right? And this is July eleventh, tomorrow is the twelfth.”

“Got it. Let’s fly out to the airstrip just after dark and load up, in case there are some spying eyes around.”

“Where can we sack out for a few hours?” Hog asked.

By seven-thirty that night they were loaded and double checked, their personal packs readied and tested, and all set to go.

“Like bloody old times!” Loughlin said. “Time to write a note home.”

“Hell, can you write?” Hog jibed.

“Stow it, Tex, or they’ll ship you back home in a shoe box.”

Stone snorted at them. “You two guys get some sleep. Morning is coming damn early. Tomorrow at this time, we’ll have our hands more than full, I’d wager.”

“Especially if they still have a battalion around there,” Hog brayed.

“Good night, Mr. Wiley.”

“Good night, Mr. Loughlin.”

In Bangkok, Coleman was lying in a hospital bed in the infirmary of the U.S. Embassy. His left arm was in a cast up to his elbow, all his fingers immobilized. He couldn’t even dial the phone.

Donner was doing that job, then handing the phone to Coleman. The CIA agent was getting worried. He couldn’t find Stone or his men in Bangkok. There were only five million people in the metropolitan area!

They must be gone. Hawk’s Roost!

All he had to do was alert the guerrilla units still operating in those backwoods areas. He could get word up there and have about twenty guerillas move in and slice up those three fugitives into paper-thin fillets!

Where was it Garrick had been messing around? Yeah, Phnom Tay, way to hell and gone up in Laos. He could get some of the guerillas to watch that area. For a few hundred dollars he could buy a dozen of them up there.

For the first time in days, Coleman smiled. He was thinking how nice it was going to be to have Stone dead. Even if he couldn’t do the honors himself.

Contingency. What if the guerillas didn’t find Stone? Backup. He would put two of his own men at the closest town to the border.

“Donner, you asshole. Go to the map room and get the best maps we have of northern Laos and northern Thailand. Do it now and hurry it up.”

Donner looked away from the TV set and frowned, then he stood and went out without a word.

If Donner hadn’t messed up on the first capture, it would have been over by now. Donner was stupid, but he was bright enough to know that he was lucky to be in the agency. Nobody else wanted Donner on a team, so Coleman had taken him when his last junior field agent moved on. Maybe they were a pair.

Coleman lay there trying to work it out. Today was the eleventh. He could get word to the guerillas to have them around the little town up in Laos by tomorrow, or the next day at the latest.

Then he would call his man on the outside and send three up to the closest town to the Lao border. Chiang something. He could never keep these fucking slant names straight. Once he got this little problem cleared up, he was going to strike for a better job. West Germany would be nice.

Donner came back with the maps.

“You’re getting slower every day, Donner. Spread them out so I can see them. You’ve got two good hands. Nothing but a little nick in your leg. Come on, we ain’t got all damned day!”

Coleman studied the maps, nodded, then glared at Donner.

“We just have to make a few more phone calls,” he snarled, “and Mark Stone is a dead man.”

## Chapter 18

Rosalyn lay in her bed that night, dreaming of tomorrow. July 12th. The day of the rebellion. It was to start early in the morning, when Lu Fang had worked out schedules so all of his men were on guard duty and on the alert.

She knew she couldn't sleep. It was not yet midnight, and the attack was set for 1:00 a.m. First, Lu Fang and his men would strip all of the weapons from the loyal troops inside the barracks, then lock them inside. With luck they could capture half of the opposing force this way. If a fight came, it would start there.

At the same time, they would take control of the basket elevator system and all the guard posts. There would be as little blood spilled as possible.

Rosalyn bumped into a chair as she paced, and knocked it over, making quite a racket. A moment later, Tui knocked on the connecting door between their apartments and came in.

"You're still up—are you ill?" Tui asked.

"No. Just can't sleep." Rosalyn patted her best friend on the shoulder. "No reason both of us should be awake. Please go back to your room and sleep."

Tui frowned and shook her head. "No, you are troubled, worried." She looked up sharply. "I hear things, you know. There is some talk of a mutiny, a rebellion." She watched Rosalyn closely. "I hope that you have nothing to do with such futile plans."

"I am not political, Tui, you have seen that."

"But a coup, that might be different. How is your friend, Lu Fang?"

A chill crept through Rosalyn. "Who? Oh, the lieutenant of the guards. Yes, he is the only one I have been able to teach to play poker. Isn't that odd?"

Tui's frown remained. "Your friendship with the young officer has been noted by the General. He used to tell me that there always is the threat of a rebellion. He said it is better to know who a traitor is within your ranks so you can watch him and counter his moves, than not to know who the traitor is."

"I don't understand, Tui."

"Pretend you were the leader of the last rebellion against the General. All of your men were caught and killed, the coup put down. But the General knows you are the leader and he lets you live so he can watch you and prevent another such try."

"A good plan," Rosalyn said. "But I don't see how it has anything to do with me."

"May all the gods agree with you, my dear lady. I think you are right. I will get some sleep." She left and Rosalyn scowled. Was Lu Fang in trouble? He had been the leader of the previous overthrow attempt. Did the General know? She continued to pace, and when it was five minutes after one, she went to the balcony and waited for Lu Fang.

He stepped toward her out of the shadows and kissed her quickly.

"It has started! It is going well. Not a shot fired. We have locked in the loyal troops and taken their weapons. We have command of every part of the fortress.

"Now I go to set the charges to blow the General off the top of the pinnacle!" He kissed her again, slid down a rope to the ground, and hurried away.

She went to bed, turned out the lights, and shivered in fear. There was no chance for sleep. Less than half an hour later she heard the explosion.

The General's quarters were on the third and top floor of the fortress, at the outside, built where he could see out his windows for fifty miles down the valley.

After the first charge went off, there were two more, smaller ones. Then she heard rifle shots and machine guns and automatic rifles stuttering.

She closed the heavy wooden shutters over her windows, barred her hall door and the door to Tui's room. Then she huddled on the bed.

For an hour she heard nothing.

Well before dawn, fighting broke out again. Automatic rifle fire blazed throughout the fortress. She was afraid to open her door, or even to look out the shuttered window. To open the heavy shutters could mean her room would be invaded by armed men. How would she know which side they were on?

Before the first light came, someone banged on her door, shouting excitedly in Lao, but the voice was so faint she caught only a few words. If she heard correctly, the uprising was in trouble.

When the light of day came at last, she removed the bar from the window shutters and opened half of one shutter a quarter of an inch. Through the slit she could see the garden. Craters had been blown in it at four spots. Two trees had been blasted apart.

At the far side, next to a stone wall, she saw four men, wearing tattered elite guard uniforms, being placed against the wall.

A sharp command came, and a dozen rifles fired. The four men fell dead on the garden path. She gasped, then covered her face with both hands and tried hard not to throw up. A minute later she closed the window and put the bar back in place.

She heard pounding on the inside door, the one that linked her living room with that of Thi. She hurried to the door and spoke loudly.

"Tui, is that you?"

"Yes, Rosalyn are you safe? How are you?"

"I'm safe. I haven't opened any doors or windows."

"I do the same. If you want me, knock on the door."

For an hour Rosalyn sat in her room worrying. For a while all would be quiet, then the sound of rifle fire and the small explosions of hand grenades filtered through the windows. She decided that she should dress, and did so. Then she fixed her hair so it fell around her shoulders in the long, black waterfall the General liked. Her long hair came past her waist now.

She wore a dress that he had admired. Then she went to the window, but this time did not open it. She sensed someone outside, waiting to burst in.

Slowly, she paced through her three rooms. She had no weapons. None had ever been needed. She wondered what had happened to Lu Fang. What were the other explosions she had heard? Had they indeed blown the General off the top of the mountain?

At last she could wait no longer. She hurried to the connecting door with Tui and knocked sharply three times. An answering knock came, then Tui's soft voice. "Rosalyn, are you *safe*?"

"Yes, you?"

“The same.”

“Is there anyone with you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why... why don't you come in here. We can talk and wait for it all to be over. Who is attacking us?”

“I'm afraid it is another coup attempt,” Tui said. “Some men will never be satisfied.”

Rosalyn heard the heavy bar being removed from the other side of the door. They had never used them before. Rosalyn looked at the bar she had used to lock out her friend. Whatever had happened with the takeover was probably settled by now. There was nothing she could do to help.

Slowly she lifted the bar from the door and set it aside.

Tui came in quickly, hugged Rosalyn, and left the door open. She smiled, then looked around. A moment later she spoke sharply.

“Come in, search the apartment, quickly!”

Three soldiers rushed in. They wore army-type fatigue uniforms, carried rifles, and all looked angry.

Rosalyn stared in disbelief at the soldiers, then at Tui. Tears seeped from her eyes and she sat quickly on the sofa. “Tui, why did you lie to me? I thought you were my friend.”

“I am your friend, but I'm not sure I can save your life. I tried to warn you. The General knew that Lu Fang was plotting to overthrow him again. He misjudged the timing.”

“You... you were his informer?”

“I am his woman.”

The guards returned, told her no one was in the apartment, and rushed out.

“Lu Fang is hiding somewhere in the fortress. His cause is lost. All but four of his men have been captured and executed. This time he will not be spared. At least thirty of the General's loyal troops have died. The elevator lift has been damaged. There will be much sadness and suffering.”

“Tui, please—”

“I must tell the General now that you knew of the plot, that you helped Lu Fang however you could.”

“You won't be able to do that, woman!” a voice snarled.

Both women turned to see Lu Fang standing in the doorway, a Childers Automatic combat shotgun in his hand, the twenty-round double-column magazine extended upward from the receiver. He leveled it at Tui.

“*Wait!*” Rosalyn screamed.

He fired.

The thirteen double-ought buck slugs ripped through Tui as if she were paper, slamming into her chest and driving her back against the wall. Most of the .32-caliber-sized slugs ploughed right through her body and into the plastered wall, leaving it splattered with a gush of blood and red streaks. The tiny girl slid slowly to the floor, then rolled over on her stomach.

“She was the traitor!” Lu Fang snarled. He darted back into the woman's room and rushed into the hall.

Rosalyn had not risen from where she had slumped on the couch when the soldiers had first entered her rooms. She stared at the lifeless form of the young woman who had taught her a strange language, who had advised and counseled her in a thousand ways. Now she was no more than a bloody lump of flesh and bones.

She heard more shooting in the hall. The deadly sound of the shotgun came again and again, but now and then it was drowned out by the yapping of the automatic rifles, slamming six- and ten-round bursts toward some unseen enemy.

A scream echoed through the hallways, followed by one last shotgun blast that was strangely muffled.

Then silence.

She did not go look. She knew what had to have happened. The odds were too great for Lu Fang to escape. There was no place for him to go. When his rounds ran out, he was a dead man. He would choose his own weapon rather than the rack. He knew what it could do to a man. For a moment she felt faint.

The rack could tear a woman apart as easily as a man. She put her hand to her forehead. She would not be sick. She would not let anyone know how frightened she was.

A half hour passed with no activity in the hallway. Then she heard someone working out there. She had not closed the two doors to Tui's apartment. The sounds filtered through to her living room.

There would be cleaning to do, probably bodies to remove. Rosalyn didn't know if she could stand or not.

She heard the entourage coming and knew it was the General. He went everywhere with four guards, a fanning girl, and a second maidservant with a variety of soft drinks.

Now she heard them enter Tui's apartment. A guard looked in and shouted his find to the General. All four guards dashed into the room and searched her apartment completely. No one could be hiding there.

They stopped around Tui's body, then one remained at the door with his submachine gun ready as the General walked in.

He was unkempt; he had not shaved. The usually immaculate uniform was wrinkled and a button was missing. A smudge of soot or powder clouded his forehead. The General's eyes were as sharp and demanding as ever.

He looked first at Tui's body. A sharp command brought the soldier to turn Tui over.

The General swore softly in Lao, then looked up at Rosalyn.

"Why have you killed your good friend?"

"I did not kill her. I have no weapons."

"You killed her last night when you did not tell her the starting time of the rebellion."

"I had no idea she would tell you."

The General nodded. "So you did know, you were a conspirator with the devil Lu Fang."

"Every prisoner of war has the right, the duty, to try to escape. I am simply obeying my obligations as a military prisoner."

"You are not a P.O.W."



"Then let me go back to the United States, or at least to Tokyo."

"I might have, if you had told me about Lu Fang."

"He also was doing what he thought was right."

"He died for his trouble. And you?"

"I have more than paid for any trouble I might have caused you. Will you be *my* slave for the next thirteen years to repay *me*?"

"Your sharp tongue will do you no good now. You have painted yourself as a traitor, so you must die like the rest. We have five more rebels to account for. When they are found, they will be placed on the rack as a public demonstration of the futility of trying to resist me."

"This is ridiculous. I had no part in the rebellion."

"But you *knew* about it. You could have warned me. You *approved* and *encouraged* Lu Fang. Most damning, you *slept* with Lu Fang!"

Rosalyn stood and walked to the window which had been opened. "You can't prove any of that. Besides, I am a slave, a prisoner here. I owe you no loyalty. As a P.O.W., it is my duty to try to escape. You're a soldier. You know that."

The General shook his head sadly. "You are still so beautiful. But you must go with the others. As a soldier, I do know that. But I am more than a soldier, more than a General. I am a ruler, leader. I shake my head and men die. I smile and women live and children laugh. It is called *power*."

He motioned to a guard who strode forward and took her by the wrist. No other man had been allowed to touch her before this. To touch the General's woman meant instant death. The guard pulled her and she stumbled forward.

He did not look back. Rosalyn had to rush to keep up with him. All too soon she knew where they were going. The heavy door through which she had been only once before opened, and they went down dark, winding stone steps.

Rosalyn shuddered. The dungeon, the torture chamber. *The rack!*

She tried not to think about it. Surely he would not put her on it! All he had to go on was the suspicion of Tui, and she was dead. Perhaps it was because she was dead that he was so adamant about her guilt. She saw little of the fortress. Had there been much damage? Had any of the rebels escaped? Where could they run to? The General owned the elevator baskets and the men who ran them, even the countryside below. She knew better. It was one last desperate grasp at some way to avoid what she knew must be coming.

When they reached the bottom of the stone steps, a weak light bulb came on. The guard took delight in ripping her clothes off. When she was naked, he locked her hands in two rings that had been positioned in the block walls.

The guard tightened up the metal shackles around her wrists. And then it hit her...

She was going to die.

The General sat behind his desk and stared out the window at the valley five hundred feet below. He could see ten miles down it today. The acrid smell of explosives still hung in the air. The heavy door to his study had been blasted off its hinges. Two of the large panes of glass in the windows had been cracked by the explosion.

If Lu Fang had obtained the best explosives the General had, the whole top of the General's headquarters could have been blown off.

He unbuttoned the new uniform jacket and sipped at a cold beer. It was the fourth attempt to unseat him. A fourth time he had come out a victor. Briefly, he looked at a sheet of paper on his desk.

The traitors had been well-trained and had almost won. If they had created a total surprise, they would have won. When Lu Fang juggled the guard schedule, the General knew trouble was coming soon.

If he had not known Lu Fang would lead the next uprising, he might have been defeated. As it was, he was badly damaged. Thirty-two rebels had been killed, four were captured. The grenade attack on the barracks had been murderous, accounting for over half of his casualties. The four rebels would die tomorrow, on the rack.

And Rosalyn.

He had lost forty-seven men, and another fifteen were wounded and not able to fight. The repairs were proceeding quickly on the elevator baskets. Without the baskets working, he could not bring up replacement troops, leaving him dangerously undermanned.

He had used his radio communications and checked with the ground headquarters. There had been no coordinated attack on the facilities below. It was not an opium-inspired attack by outsiders. That would be much harder to handle.

An internal uprising he would have no trouble with. Soon he would have the repairs done on the counterbalancing mechanism.

He was trapped up here himself. For years he knew he should have a helicopter for special trips, and to move quickly to the fields and warehouses below. A four-place helicopter would be about right. He would order one from his supplier in Tokyo on the next communication.

He checked his defenses again. Thin. Dangerously thin. From his usual security force of 150 men he had lost virtually half of them in the uprising. He called in his new top lieutenant and barked orders to reduce the wall guards to half the usual force, to extend the guard hours from four to six, and to pull all military men off other duties and put them into uniform for security duty.

He sat back, finished the can of beer, and threw the empty at a basket in the corner. He missed. He surveyed his domain again.

He had wanted Rosalyn when the guard led her away. Perhaps he should bring her up from the dungeon and offer her one last night of delight. She would try to kill him—then he could use his knife and kill her himself. It would be a proper ending for their relationship.

He shook his head. A public execution on the rack would be better; it would send a strong message to the people.

Tomorrow. He would crank the lever himself. Some things a leader had to do by his own hand.

Defenses. He was still thinking about his security. For a moment he considered the Death trail, the old way of getting to the top of Blood Mountain. It was used more than two hundred years ago when the first Chinese warlord had built his tower here.

He had placed ten men at the near end of the trail. It was more than ten miles long, extending far back along the sheer walls to where earthquakes had broken down the ramparts and allowed erosion and some clever rock work by the ancients to build a trail up nearly vertical rock walls and over mountains of rock falls. No one had used the trail in twenty or thirty years.

He had kept ten men there on a bleak point a mile down the trail from the edge of the fortress, where it leveled out after the torturous climb. He sent a runner to the point, cut the force to five, then had the rest rush back to help in the main fortress defenses.

The top hundred feet of elevator had been disabled by the rebels. They had sawed a cable in half and thrown all the counterbalancing weights over the side. It would take a week to rig a new cable, slowly adjust it to the counterbalancing weights and rocks, and hope that it would work.

Until then, they would go on half-rations for the troops and workers and maintain a strict military red alert.

He went to the wall and checked on his guards. They were spaced farther apart, but each man was fit and ready. In a sudden fit of anger, he stormed to the dungeon, turned on the lights, and opened the doors. He ordered one of the rebels to be taken below, then he walked down and tore off his general's jacket and stared at the condemned man.

Without a word, he gave a signal, and the rebel was stripped naked and thrown on a large frame of the rack. Quickly his wrists and ankles were chained to the ends of the rack's frame.

The General moved to the cranking lever and began turning it. With each rotation of the crank, the bar at the end of the rack moved an inch. Quickly, the chains stretched the soldier's body tight so it lifted off the floor supported only by the four chains.

Rosalyn slumped against the cold rock wall less than ten feet from the rack. She had watched at first, strangely fascinated to see how she would die. Part of her mind was curious, part horrified. At last she turned her head and closed her eyes, trying desperately to go in her mind to that pleasant garden where cool water bubbled, birds sang, flowers bloomed, and all was well on God's green earth.

But she couldn't.

She heard the first scream, then the next and the next. She wished that she could faint, but she simply could not.

The soldier screamed obscenities at the General.

"Was Lu Fang the only leader of the revolt?" the General asked quietly.

The soldier on the rack screamed on.

The General moved the crank around three times. The prisoner's eyes bulged as one arm popped from its socket.

On the next crank the soldier's other arm popped out of joint and one leg lost its hip connection.

The tearing, searing, screaming rage of the soldier on the rack echoed through the dungeon until the pain became so intense that he could no longer stand it and he passed out.

With a sudden fury, the General cranked the handle around a dozen times. The power-multiplying gears ground the end bar farther and farther until tendons

snapped and muscles frayed and the Vietnamese soldier's arms tore free from his body. His head and torso smashed downward against the rock floor and blood oozed from his cracked skull.

The General did not look at the body. He told the guard in charge to clean up the garbage and dispose of it. There would be four more to deal with in the morning.

As he went past Rosalyn he hesitated, wanting to say something, wishing she had not been involved.

Her eyes were filled with *fear*. And hatred.

She *had* been involved, the General told himself.

And soon, she would pay the price.

## Chapter 19

### ***0300 hours, July 12th.***

The French chopper, with Vic Samersom at the controls, lifted off from Chiang Khong after topping off all tanks with aviation fuel. Soon they crossed the imaginary line into Laos from Thailand.

Mark Stone sat in the second seat up front with Hog and Terrance sprawled over supplies and packs in back. It used to be a four-place bird, but Samersom took out two seats for more cargo space.

The three raiders wore camo fatigues and soft hats with camo-streaked faces and hands. Each man had a combat harness loaded with all the gear he thought he could carry and still move and fight. Hog laid his head on the edge of his pack and promptly went to sleep.

Terrance was amazed at how cool the big Texan could be. Right now they were facing a life-or-death situation, and Loughlin wanted to cram every bit of living into the time he had left—just in case. He would sleep when, and if, he got back.

Terrance checked his personal gear again, then went over the Ingram that hung on a strap around his neck. It was a beauty of a little rattler, and he intended to use it.

Up front, Stone watched the man at the controls. He knew what he was doing. An Khom said Samersom had flown eighty-nine missions in 'Nam, had two birds shot out from under him, and walked away from each one. He went into 'Nam as a first lieutenant and stayed that way for two years. His choice. For the past ten years he had been freelancing out of Thailand. Mostly commercial jobs, and ferrying a V.I.P. or two.

Even in the dark, Stone knew the pilot was keeping them close to the tree tops. There was no radar in this part of the world, but altitude cost money in a chopper, and they would climb when they had to.

Stone and Samersom had plotted out the flight path to take advantage of every valley along the way, but sooner or later they would have to fly up into the mountains.

An hour later, they passed their first checkpoint, the moon marking a junction of two good-sized rivers. Samersom whipped the little craft along the left-hand river, and they began to climb.

A half hour later, Stone called to his men, and Hog woke up instantly. They all crawled into their combat harnesses and checked their fighting gear. Each had an AK-47 as well as the Ingram M10. They were ready. Now all they had to do was find the target.

"Talked to a friend," Samersom said. "He told me he flew past a place up here beyond Phnom Tay once, a place up on a mountain that was lit up like a damned Christmas tree. Want to take a look beyond Tay?"

"Closer we can get, the better," Stone said.

They were five minutes ahead of schedule as the bird dipped into a long valley and flew over a hamlet they figured had to be Phnom Tay. Samersom swung the chopper due north.

"Climbing," Samersom said. "We're at about six thousand feet. Moving about a mile and a half a minute. Let's give her ten minutes and scout around."

At nine minutes they saw it. The valley below was five miles long and cultivated. Rising at the end was a black butte that soared almost straight up. On top was a blaze of lights.

"Don't get any closer!" Stone commanded. "They've probably heard us by now. Find a spot and let's get down. Make it a place you can find again in forty-eight hours."

The river was the only landmark. Samersom cut his speed and slid along the riverbank until he found a sandbar and a tributary coming in. There couldn't be many like this.

He dropped in on the sandbar, and the three men piled out of the rig and shouldered their packs. Then each picked up a barracks bag loaded with ammo and supplies, and jogged into the nearby trees.

At this altitude there was little jungle, but there was still a thick growth of hardwood trees and teak, but fewer of the bamboo thickets.

Samersom lifted off without a word.

They stowed the barracks bags under a tall teak tree, then cut branches to cover up the bags.

Stone manned the point as they angled through a light patch of woods into a cultivated field. Stone stopped, picked up one of the plants, and snorted.

"Poppies. We're right in the middle of this fall's shipment of opium."

In the distance, he could see the glow of night floodlights on the pinnacle. Stone figured they would have plenty of diesel generator power up there. They must bring in barrels of fuel to keep all of the lights alive.

He had no idea how anyone got to the top of the rock, but if it was a road it was a pisser. Maybe some kind of a hoist. As he was working it over in his mind, he heard shots from ahead.

All three Americans went flat in the poppy field. The shots came closer and as Stone lifted up, he could see the winking flashes of stuttering automatic rifles.

"Welcoming committee?" Terrance whispered.

Stone shook his head. "Too early. Somebody's after a local. Let's see if we can give him a hand."

By the angle of the fight it was obvious the attackers were chasing one or more through a patch of woods and brush that followed a small stream. Stone changed his angle and they jogged in that direction, so they would be well in front of the attack.

When they got there they found a fallen teak tree, four feet in diameter, and slid behind it. Ahead they saw more firing—and what seemed to be return fire.

“Two of them, and coming fast,” Hog grunted. “Be here in about two minutes if they make it.”

“I’d say there are six to eight giving chase,” Terrance estimated. “Damn pissed-off, from the way they’re throwing lead.”

“If they keep coming through here, we let the foxes get well past us, then hit the hunters at point-blank range,” Stone said. “They won’t know what killed them. We can’t leave anyone to report back, understand?”

Both men nodded, spaced themselves along the heavy teak log, and got ready for the showdown.

Bullets soon zipped over their heads as the runners kept to the cover of the narrow strip of woods.

“One fox almost here!” Terrance hissed.

A moment later a man came over the teak log and Hog pounced on him. The man struggled for a moment, then looked at Hog’s foreign face in the partial moonlight and grinned.

“G.I.!” he said.

“Damn right, kid. You keep down. Anybody else coming?”

The man stared without understanding.

Hog held up one finger, pointed at the man, then held up two fingers.

The small Vietnamese man shook his head.

“Getting close,” Terrance whispered.

Hog looked over the log and could see them.

All three men waited. Two minutes later they spotted a line of six soldiers moving ahead, slowly checking the brush and hiding spots. They were less than forty yards away.

“Now!” Stone called. All three fired. As was their system, the end men took the end men in the line of enemy, the center man concentrated on the center of the line.

The AK-47s brayed out a deadly rattle. In twenty seconds, all six of the Vietnamese AWOL soldiers had been killed, chopped up by 7.62mm slugs.

“I’ll check them,” Hog volunteered. He vaulted over the teak log and ran forward, lumbering through the small growth like an elephant over saw-tooth grass. He examined the six bodies, once using his knife when a form rose up against him, then all was quiet. He grabbed three extra AK-47 magazines, and one rifle for their newfound friend and returned.

Stone had been talking with the Vietnamese.

“Says he’s one of six men on the ground who were taking part in a try to overthrow the General up on the pinnacle, in the Hawk’s Roost. The General knew it was coming and had a list, evidently. This man, Dak, is the last one alive down here. Most of them were machine-gunned in their beds.”

“The takeover missed, then?” Terrance asked.

Stone, who knew rudimentary Vietnamese, translated.

“Dak says the telephone system to the top went out and the elevator system has been sabotaged and is not working, but he thinks the General won the fight on top. However, he’s short on troops, and can’t get any more men for two days.”

Stone considered the new intel. There had been some kind of elevator, but it was out. He had a dozen questions. He talked to the small man slowly, as the other two men went forward to get all of the AK-47 ammo they could find from the dead enemy.

When his men returned, Mark Stone was ready to move.

“There were thirty-five men on top who tried the coup,” Stone told them. “Nobody below knows how many men the General lost, but he’s been on the radio, so he’s still alive and in control.”

“So how do we get up there?” Hog asked.

“Dak says there’s an old trail that hasn’t been used for years. He doesn’t even know if it’s passable anymore, but it’s the only way. It goes up the back side, gets rugged at times, and in a place or two, we might have to rope up to get there. Dak says he’ll lead us if we’ll help take out the General.”

“Three of us against probably a hundred armed men? Sounds about right.” Terrance stood up. “Let’s get saddled up and out of here.”

“Hog?” Stone asked.

“Hell, yeah. I didn’t come this far to wait two days for a damn elevator.”

They gave Dak his choice of the AK-47 rifles the dead men carried, then took the rest of the weapons and threw them in the river.

“We have a half hour to first light,” Stone said. “Dak tells me we have to be out of the poppy fields by then or we’re bound to be discovered and get into another shootout. Let’s double-time it.”

Jogging with a forty-pound pack was not Hog’s favorite activity, but he growled only a little and concentrated on keeping up. Dak led them. He had been born in the valley and knew every rock, river, and tree. When the first false dawn broke through the night, they had a half mile to go.

They slipped out of the poppy field into a tree-lined creek and moved along quickly on the far side. Just as the sun lit up the sky beyond the hills, they were out of the valley and working up a narrow ravine that Dak said would lead them five miles upward, toward the start of the trail to the Roost.

They took a five-minute break, and Hog edged up to Stone.

“Can we trust this little slant?”

“I do,” Stone said. “He was about to get run down and shot to death. Makes a man think through his priorities. He was already one of the rebels. Nobody knew we were coming, so it couldn’t have been a set-up.”

Hog nodded. “Yeah. I guess. If they wanted to trap us they could have done it a hell of a lot easier than this.”

It was daylight.

Dak worked ahead of them on point. He checked the land, listened for work parties, and generally moved them up the wooded ravine smoothly. They covered the five miles in a little over an hour and a half.

All four of them lay hidden in the brush as they watched a stone hut. They waited for a half hour and nothing moved. Dak cut himself a walking stick, left his rifle and ammo belt with the others, and casually walked up the hill a hundred yards to the hut. He vanished inside.

A moment later he came out and waved them forward.

It was deserted, nobody had been there for some time. Stone looked at the trail. It wound for seven miles around and up and across the steep upthrust of granite. It looked impossible to climb.

Dak told him that this trail had been carved from the side of the cliffs more than three hundred years ago, when this was part of China and a famous Chinese warlord had commanded the Hawk's Roost. To many, it was known as Blood Mountain. All of the supplies and building tools had been carried up this trail.

"Let's do it," Hog said.

Dak led the way out, Stone went second, and Terrance and Hog brought up the rear. It was a stiff walk up a sharp incline. Then they came to a place where the trail had been swept away by a rock fall. It was twenty feet to the far side, where the trail continued. There was no way around the trail break. The drop-off was moderate, not more than a hundred feet, but it looked like a thousand.

"So?" Terrance quipped. "I'm an explosives expert. Not a mountain goat."

Stone took off his pack and found what he needed. It was a folding grappling hook. He unfolded the aluminum device that turned into a three-pronged hook with a weighted eye on the front for tying on the rope. He produced a thin, ultrastrong nylon rope that was only a quarter of an inch thick.

"Fine for you skinny guys," Hog griped. "What about us, uh, mature men?"

Stone tied the grapple on and checked his line. He tied the other end of the line around his boot and coiled the line for a throw. On the third pitch the hooks caught, but when he put his weight on the line, the hook slanted off the rock and dangled in space.

Four throws later the hook held. Dak jabbered something at Stone.

"He wants to go over first and make sure the hook is set firmly," Stone rasped. "We'll anchor this end of the line."

"Okay!" Dak said. He took the thin line, wrapped it around his right arm and slid off the side of the trail, holding the line taut. Slowly he worked down the slide area at an angle until he was directly below the other side of the trail. The rope and hook held. Now, slowly, hand over hand, he began to work up the face of the slide to the other side of the trail.

"I'm gonna do *that*?" Hog bellowed.

"If you want your merit badge, old man," Terrance rasped.

Dak was on the other side of the trail now, and Stone threw him the end of a heavier line. Stone had sent some pitons with him, and he now drove the steel posts into the solid rock crevices and secured the new, larger rope.

Stone did the same thing on his side and stretched the half-inch rope as tight as he could.

"I'll go," Terrance said. They tied a safety line to his waist and to a piton on the far side, then he held the half-inch rope and swung out where the trail had been. The rope sagged almost three feet as it stretched, but it held. Terrance worked



across the hole in the trail hand over hand, walking against the side of the slide for support. In thirty seconds, he was across.

"Piece of cake!" he shouted back.

Hog looked at the drop-off and the missing chunk of trail. He tested the rope. For a moment he hesitated.

"Christ, this must be why I pumped so much iron and did those damn hundred push-ups every morning."

Hog was the strongest man in the crew. And the heaviest. They tied the safety line around his waist, and he crossed himself.

Stone saw it.

"I didn't know you were Catholic."

"Neither did I. But right now, who's gonna argue?" Hog winked and stepped out against the rock. He went hand over hand across the gap in the trail, like he was out for a Sunday stroll. They threw the line back and Stone rigged it to hold as long as it had pressure on it. If they let it relax and shook it, the knot should come out and they could retrieve the rope.

A half a minute more and Stone made it across the gap. He shook the rope four times before it worked, and pulled it across. Using a small mountain climbing hammer, he removed the pitons and put them and the ropes back in his pack. They might have to use them again.

The trail became steeper. They came to a part of the trail that went across a massive rock slide. This was the bottom of it, and they had to climb over and around boulders as big as houses.

Just as the sun was directly overhead, Stone called a break. They ate high-energy chocolate bars and freeze-dried foods they had brought. Their three canteens had not been tapped, and now Stone permitted the men to drink.

After fifteen minutes, they moved again. They were about one-third of the way, Dak said.

"Shit! This is straight up!" Hog bellowed.

The trail had slanted up sharply across the sheer face of another rock wall. The path had been hacked out of the granite wall, evidently by hammer and chisel. There was no way to cross the hundred feet of the vertical wall except along the steep, narrow shelf.

"It's two feet wide and I'm three feet wide!" Hog roared. "How the fuck do I get past here?"

"Suck it in, fat one," Terrance called, already waiting behind him.

"Give your pack to Dak," Stone commanded. "He says he can carry it and you'll be able to press against the side of the cliff as you move along. The Laos and Chinese went across this section for two hundred years. Bet you can make it."

"What a hell of a way to die!" Hog snarled. "Fall off some damn cliff while I'm going to a fucking roost!"

Hog swore and shouted all the way across. Once he was on the other side he grinned. "Louder I scream, the less time I have to think. I'm not too wild about high places, anyway."

Again the pitch of the trail increased. Here, steps had been chiseled in granite. Ages ago, Chinese must have labored for years to cut steps up the side of these slabs of stone.

When they got to the top of the steps, they had a treat. For nearly a hundred feet they went through a path of woods in a narrow little ravine where enough soil had accumulated to let trees grow.

Then they were at a point where Stone paused to consider whether they should keep on going or not. All four of them gathered on the lip of the trail and looked ahead.

The route here was still ill-defined, but went across a stretch of a hundred yards that was comparatively flat, and more than ten yards wide. Such a luxury they hadn't seen for hours.

But as they watched, rocks and sudden slides of dirt thundered onto the shelf and careened over the edge of a three-hundred-foot sheer drop.

"We spot for each other," Stone called.

His voice was nearly drowned out as a dozen rocks the size of Volkswagens tumbled and rumbled down the slope in front of them. One hit an upthrust and splintered into a hundred pieces of jagged stone shrapnel. They all hit the dirt.

"We *what?*" Terrance yelled.

"We pick our spots. That rock that just got bashed, it's still there. The downhill side is a protected spot. That's, what, about thirty yards out? We send one man out there when the way is clear. It's big enough to protect all four of us. From there we find the next safe spot and watch for an opening."

As he spoke, a gush of small rocks, sand, and dirt boiled down the slope. When it came to the upthrust, the big rock divided the flow and it passed on both sides. Anyone behind the rock would have survived.

"I'll go first," Hog said. "Give me the snap count."

Terrance looked at Hog in surprise. "A bloody game? Is that all this is to you, a bloody game?"

"On one," Stone said scanning the slope. Two boulders crashed past. Then Stone shouted.

"Go, Hog!"

The big man rushed away from them like a defensive lineman, and Terrance was reminded how quick a man he could be. A small rock stormed past, just ahead of Hog, then one came behind him. A moment later he slid to a stop behind the big rock.

"Yeah, there will be room for all four of us," Stone said. He sent Dak next, then Terrance, and came last himself. They just got there when a heavy fall came—stones, dirt, and a large boulder or two.

Dust covered them after the junior landslide rushed past. Hog had picked out the next safe spot forty yards away. It was a pair of boulders that would deflect anything short of half the mountain.

Twenty minutes later they were all safely on the other side. Stone checked his watch.

"Two o'clock. I wonder what's happening at the Roost? The General is probably binding up his wounds, burying his dead, or pitching them off the side. And trying to fix his blessed elevator. This damn trail does have its drawbacks."

Dak approached Stone cautiously. The big American looked at the Vietnamese. For all he knew, he might at one time have traded bullets with this soldier.

“Could be a problem,” Dak said in Vietnamese. “Before, General put ten men at top of trail as guards.”

“That could be a problem. How far would they be ahead?”

“One half kilometer.”

“Then you and me will go up and take a look. Do a little scouting, a patrol.”

When they slid up past some boulders and looked forward ten minutes later, they saw a small stone house with smoke coming from the chimney.

“Ten men?” Stone asked, as always, in Vietnamese. “Always before.”

“I need to know for sure. We should take out this place quietly if we can. How far to the fortress?”

“Two kilometers. Easy trail.”

Before Stone could decide anything, five men scrambled from the stone house, threw down a tripod and efficiently mounted a machine gun in a dug in firing position, loaded it and were ready to fire. Three men had deployed as security around the gun.

It was aiming directly at Stone.

## Chapter 20

Stone sucked in a quick breath as the machine gun began firing.

Dak touched his arm, grinning.

“Practice shooting with blanks.”

“Let’s add some realism. The MG fire will cover our shots. You take the two defensive men on the left. I’ll get the other three. Let’s do it!”

Stone waited for the Vietnamese to fire first, then he squeezed the trigger on the AK-47 and blew the loader backward in the pit. Before the gunner could finish his burst of ten rounds, a neat black hole developed in his forehead, and he slammed down on top of his dead loader.

He heard Dak shooting. He switched to automatic fire and sprayed one of the ammo bearer security men who rose to try to run for the stone house. The guy never made it.

Dak ceased firing.

Stone looked at the door of the guard house, but there was no movement. They lay still. Waiting. Watching. Nothing stirred. No one tried to leave the rock building to run up the trail toward the fortress.

At last Dak pointed to a route they could take to come up on the blind side of the house. Windows were a luxury when this stone outpost was built.

Moving cautiously, they soon were pressed against the heavy building blocks. Stone changed magazines, ramming a fresh one in his AK-47. Then he burst around the corner and ran to the door. It was open.

He jumped inside at an angle, his AK-47 up, on full auto, and ready. There were no men inside the place. He sat down in a chair, and called to Dak that all was clear. The small Vietnamese man quickly hurried down the trail to bring up the other men and the packs.

Stone checked the interior of the place but could find no phone and no radio. It was a low-security outpost.

Hog brought in the machine gun. It was a French make, but fired 7.62 slugs the same as the AK, so there was plenty of ammo.

"We'll take it with us," Stone said. "Dak and I will move ahead and check out the place. I want a quick look before we go in tonight. The General may have let his guard down just a little. He thinks nobody can get to him way up here without the noise of a chopper assault."

Dak and Stone left their packs at the rock guardhouse, and moved up the trail at a trot.

They had been moving less than fifteen minutes when, ahead, Stone could make out a wall with spikes on the top. "That's it?"

"Far corner of wall. Whole fortress have wall around it."

"Guards on the wall?"

"At posts inside, on raised platforms. Can fire over the top."

"We have to get in quietly. Where would be the best point?"

Dak nodded, led Stone back a hundred feet and to the left. Here some ancient god had played ball with huge boulders that littered the area. Some rested against the fifteen-foot-high wall. The boulders were nearly eight feet tall.

Stone nodded, and they worked back to the trail and hurried down to the guardhouse. Dak insisted on standing guard up the trail a hundred yards.

"Relief party might come," he told Stone in Vietnamese.

The three men in the guardhouse relaxed, rubbed sore muscles, and had a hot meal from freeze-dried foods and water from their canteens.

It was an hour to dusk, and Hog took a nap. Terrance and Stone cleaned their weapons and checked equipment. Terrance found a box filled with loaded AK-47 magazines and laid out four more for each of them.

At dusk, Dak came in and Stone insisted that he eat. Then they shouldered their packs and moved up the trail toward the wall.

"First objective is to get inside this mother," Stone grunted. "Then we take out as many of them as we can. Silently. He must have a hundred men left. Dak knows the inside of the place like a map."

"Where will the lady be?" Terrance asked.

"Dak says there are two apartments on the second floor where the General keeps his lady. We'll check that out early. Our prime objective is to get the General. If we can capture him, he'll order his troops to lay down their weapons, and our moves from there on will be a lot easier."

"Damn. I wish we'd told Samersom to pick us up on top," Hog said.

Stone grinned. "He knows. If he can't find us, he circles this place and when I hear him, I shoot up a green flare. That means we own the place. If we can't find a green flare we'll set three bonfires in a triangle."

"First we have to take down this place," Terrance growled. "Then we can worry about leaving."

As they worked up to the wall, Stone gave them the plan. They would work silently around the wall, eliminating as many of the guards as possible. When the quiet attack turned hard, Stone and Dak would move directly to the second floor

and the apartment where they hoped to find Rosalyn. Hog and Loughlin would work their way to the third floor, to the General's suite, and capture him.

At least that was the plan.

"If we get pinned down, use your grenades and anything else handy," Stone said.

They crouched in the dark at the base of the wall. Dak went up the rock first, with a sawtooth garrote that would slice a man's head off with a few pulls. He jumped to the wall and pulled himself up. Dak lay on the narrow ledge of wall, holding the spikes as he waited.

Then, in a quick lunge, he jumped over the spikes, landed on the guard platform, and drove his knife into the guard's heart. The sentry was finishing a cigarette he had hidden in his hand.

One by one, Stone's men went over the wall. They moved opposite ways along the catwalk. Stone took down the next guard with a loop-ended garrote, then Dak silenced another with a knife thrust, and threw him over the wall.

Dak motioned Stone down as they crept through some plantings and worked around a garden. Dak pointed to an open window on the second floor.

"Ladies' rooms," he said softly. They paused as a guard worked across the flower garden, then vanished. Stone and Dak moved slowly around the garden, hid in the shadows of the three-story rock building, and waited for the guard to make his return trip.

It took nearly five minutes. When the guard went around the end of the building, Dak stood on Stone's shoulders, grabbed the bottom of the second-floor balcony supports, and pulled himself up. Stone waited.

Within thirty seconds, Dak let down a bedspread for Stone to climb.

There was no one in either of the apartments, and there was blood on the floor in the second set of rooms. Stone scowled. He had no way of knowing whose rooms these might be, or whose blood was on the floor.

"The General's quarters," Stone whispered.

They went out the door into the hail and immediately the attack went hard. Two guards lifted rifles, but Stone blasted them into oriental heaven with his Ingram. More doors popped open. They could hear footsteps.

Stone and Dak charged down the hall, spraying the doors with bullets until they came to the stairs and dashed up them. Six guards rushed down, some still putting on their uniforms. The Ingram belched killer lead again, dropping the first three on the steps, tripping the other three behind them. None of the enemy had his weapon ready to fire.

Dak dispatched one with his knife. Stone kicked another one in the throat, breaking his neck. The third turned to run back up the stairs, but Stone dropped him with a thrown stiletto that drove through his spine.

They rushed up the rest of the rock steps to the third floor. Stone lay on the top step and unlatched the door, then moved low again and swung it open.

At once the door was shattered by a dozen rounds of automatic rifle fire. Stone had reloaded the Ingram and sprayed the corridor. He saw two men go down, and a third dart into a door. Dak had fired the other way down the hall and eliminated one man. Another dove for cover.

“End of the hall, that way! The General!” Dak shouted. He jumped up and ran toward the General’s rooms. A man in fatigues darted from a doorway and fired three rounds from an automatic Childers combat shotgun.

The blast caught Dak in the chest, killing him on his feet, pulping his guts, and slamming him to the ground. His corpse twitched and bled.

The only thing that saved Stone was that he was still flat on the floor, trying to cover Dak’s advance. Stone’s fifteen-round burst from the Ingram sprayed a line of slugs up the shotgunner’s belly and through his neck and face. He flopped backward, the scattergun slamming two more rounds of the deadly .32-caliber double-ought pellets into the rock ceiling before his finger came off the trigger.

Stone lay in the doorway, gun smoke eddying about, keeping his eyes averted from the brave little guy who had paid the ultimate sacrifice to get them this far.

For a moment it was silent. Outside, he heard an explosion and wondered what it was. But he had no more time to speculate. He surged to his feet and raced down the hallway until he came to double doors. He guessed they were six inches thick. He slapped a quarter pound of C-4 plastic explosive on the section beside the knob, set a detonator at fifteen seconds, triggered it to start, and darted into an adjoining room.

A small Laotian woman looked up at him. She had been dressing and now wore only a long skirt. Her breasts were small and pink-tipped. He held up his hand to calm her. Then swung shut the door just as the C-4 exploded. He jerked open the door and raced forward through the dust and plaster.

The heavy door had been shattered and blasted inward. Behind him a man who had been in the hall had been caught by the blast and was pasted against the end of a door that had been open. His eyes stared in confusion at his own sudden death.

Stone jolted through the blasted-open doorway. Across the room he found another door that sagged on its hinges. No one was in the first area.

He kicked open the sagging door, his Ingram up. At a desk across the room sat a tall man with graying hair and a full beard. He wore a Vietnamese army uniform with two stars on each shoulder.

The man was still dazed by the blast, but he held a pistol in his hand. Stone slammed a four-round burst from the Ingram through the General’s wrist, jolting the weapon away.

Stone rushed forward, pushed the General back from his desk, and jerked him upright. He was almost as tall as Stone.

“Tell your men to quit fighting.”

The dazed man waved a hand in front of his face.

“I know you understand English. Do you have a public address system?”

“Yes.”

“Get on it. Tell your men to lay down their arms, or you are a dead man. Do it now!”

Slowly the General reached for a small microphone on his desk.

“Switches,” he said.

Stone stood behind him, watching exactly what the man did. He picked up the mike, then pushed a switch.

The huge fist of an explosion smashed Stone backward. The General flew past him as the entire desk complex erupted in smoke and flames.

Stone nearly lost consciousness, but not quite. He fought to keep his mind clear. Gradually he came back from the edge and sat up. The Ingram hung around his neck. He saw the General crawling away.

Stone leaped to his feet and kicked the General in the belly, tumbling him over on his back. The black muzzle of the Ingram pushed against the General's mouth.

"One twitch and you're vulture meat," Stone snarled. "Where is the woman, the American woman, Rosalyn James?"

The General laughed. He shook his head. "All this for a woman? I could buy you a hundred!"

Stone kicked the guy.

"Where is she, General?"

"In... the dungeon... on the rack..."

Outside, another explosion rocked the fortress.

Stone motioned with the muzzle. "Get up. Take me to your dungeon. One wrong word to your men and you die. Understand?" The General nodded. "Tell them to let us pass."

*The rack?*

Stone's mind whirled.

What kind of monster was this?

Rosalyn was really *here!* The man had reacted to her name. But in a dungeon?

*On a rack?*

Wiley and Laughlin swept around the side of the fortress wall. There were fewer lookout posts here, and only half of them were manned.

The third guard died silently, at the end of Hog's knife. Laughlin took out the second one using his AK as a club to split his skull.

They came to a barracks structure behind which the wall dropped five hundred feet.

A door opened, and a shaft of yellow light stabbed out. A soldier emerged, laughing, yelling something back through the door. Then he reeled forward and met the AK-47 butt stroke that smashed into his forehead, courtesy of Hog Wiley.

The foot soldier went down and out for eternity.

Loughlin slipped forward and lifted up so he could see through a window. He eased down and quickly plastered half of a cube of plastic explosive to the sides of two hand grenades. He left room for the arming handle to fly off.

"Whole piss pot full of them in there. Let's make this hit go hard."

Hog made up two C-4 bombs, and on signal they pulled the pins and threw their four souped-up grenades through the windows, ten feet apart.

The explosions came with a thundering roar as the grenades set off the C-4, blowing out the windows and doors, killing more than twenty of the General's men inside.

Hog raced to the blown-off door and emptied one magazine of his Ingram inside the barracks room, shoved in a second, and blasted three soldiers who tried to fight back.

A moment later, Hog and Loughlin lunged around the corner of the barracks, and paused.

“Where to now?” Hog asked.

Loughlin was trying to remember the map the rebel had drawn for them. “Third floor, somewhere. Let’s go in over there.”

They eased in a doorway and found a guard. Loughlin slammed a hand chop into the man’s throat, smashing his windpipe. Hog clubbed him with his AK-47 and dumped him to the side. They saw polished stone steps to the left, and ran up them to the second floor.

Two more guards faced them. Hog lifted the toy-like Ingram and blasted both of them before they could react.

Behind them, a locked door stopped their progress. Loughlin took out another quarter-pound cube of plastic explosive and pasted it against the lock on the door, added a detonator, and set it for ten seconds. Flipping the switch on, they ran back down the nearby stairs.

The resulting blast pinned them both against the wall for a moment and scrambled their sense of hearing. They charged up the steps and saw the door blown off its hinges and dumped into the room. Inside was the General’s weapons room and his ammo dump. Cases of grenades, a shelf with LAWs, another dozen shelves filled with boxes of small arms rounds. There were pistols and submachine guns, and AK-47s.

Hog looked at Loughlin and nodded. First principle of warfare is to destroy the enemy’s ability to fight back. In this case, wipe out the weapons. To one side, Loughlin found a wooden case filled with quarter-pound blocks of C-4. It was too much to set off at once here. He ripped open the box, took out four cubes, and laid them on top of the open cases of hand grenades. He stuffed six of the cubes inside his shirt and buttoned it, then threw the rest on the grenades.

This time, Loughlin set the detonator for thirty seconds. He pushed it to the “on” position, and both men raced out of the room and down the steps. Three guards stared at them on the ground floor, but Loughlin’s AK-47 responded with a burst of ten rounds, knocking down two of the men.

Hog blasted the last one with his Ingram after he took a round in his left forearm.

They ran over the downed men, out of the building, and around the next solid rock wall they could find.

Loughlin always counted down his own timers. When he got to twenty-eight, that end of the fortress shuddered with the explosion.

Streamers of fire shot into the sky, and the roof of the two-story rock structure sagged, then collapsed. The front wall teetered, then leaned outward and fell into the courtyard. Grenades kept popping like firecrackers.

Three dazed soldiers waving their weapons staggered out of the new building. Hog hosed them down with buzzing hornets from the AK-47.

“Where were we heading?” Hog sneered.

“The General’s place. We need a building that has three floors!”

They darted back into the darkness, circled the ruins of the ammo storage building, and sprinted through patchy darkness to a three-story structure that would have made the local mason contractors proud.



“Up?” Loughlin asked.

“Third floor, please,” Hog said. They kicked in the door and stormed inside, twin Ingrams providing assault fire that cut down two guards and sent a third diving into an adjoining room.

Both Hog and Loughlin hit the floor. They were in a half-lit room that seemed to be some kind of administration office.

Hog spotted a rifle barrel edging around the far door. He jerked the pin of a grenade and threw it down the hall. The lethal little bomb bounced twice on the wooden hallway floor, then rolled six feet before it went off.

A scream pierced the half-light, and a Vietnamese man lifted up from the far door and staggered forward.

Hog blasted him in the chest with three rounds from the AK-47, using only his big left hand to aim and fire. His right held the tiny Ingram that spit fire.

Then they searched all the rooms and found only sleeping areas and one or two small offices. Nothing else. No people. No dead bodies.

Back down the stairs, they slid to the far door and looked out. For a moment, they didn't believe what they saw there.

In the shadows and the half-lights of the floods, they could make out a ragtag group of women and children. Behind them, and in between, walked soldiers in their camo green uniforms, but none had weapons.

The band moved on, turning away from Hog and Loughlin, marching toward the wall. There someone hit a switch, and the big gate swung open. The people, maybe seventy-five to a hundred, walked out of the fortress. Hog counted more than thirty men in the group, all soldiers, who were moving out of the fortress, giving up the battle.

Just then a shot slammed past them, and both men ducked.

“Looks like we still got a little mopping up to do,” Hog thundered. “Let's get to it!”

## Chapter 21

Stone nudged the still dazed, angry General down the corridor. He jabbered at two guards in Vietnamese, and Stone caught most of it. He told them not to interfere.

“So far you might live another hour or two,” Stone snapped. “Get us to that dungeon!”

They met no one else on the way. Another explosion rocked the old fortress. Then they came to a door. There was no guard. Stone made the General pull it open. Stone kept his rear covered as he checked inside. Steps went down.

“Is this it?”

“Yes, yes. Inside,” the General said.

They went in, and the General turned on a light. It glowed there and partway down the steps.

“Move it!” Stone ordered. They went down the steps slowly, Stone watching for an ambush. Suddenly an automatic rifle blazed at him from below, and Stone rattled off fifteen rounds from the Ingram.

From below came a low scream that ended in a gurgle. The shadows down here were cold, clammy, dark.

They moved downward again.

And there it was. There *she* was.

The rack was lit by a weak bulb. Lying on the stone platform was a woman. Stone rushed forward.

*Rosalyn!* Fourteen years older, unconscious, and strung up on a rack in this shitpit... and she was the most beautiful sight Stone had ever seen.

He tore at the mechanism, at last saw how it was lashed together, and unlatched the pulleys and chains until her hands fell. Slowly one eye opened, then the other. There was sudden fear in them as she looked past him.

“Look out!”

He spun away defensively. The General had slipped his bindings and picked an ancient Chinese war club from where it had been displayed on the wall. He swung it viciously, but it only grazed Stone’s shoulder.

He brought up his Ingram, but saw at once that the slide had locked open—it was out of rounds! His AK-47 was four feet away where he had rested it to free Rosalyn.

The war club came swinging at him again. He rolled toward the automatic rifle, but the General jumped that way as well, and cut him off with a vicious swing that missed but drove Stone back. He felt in his belt for another filled Ingram magazine, found one, and did a shoulder roll across the stone platform inside the rack. There he dropped out the used magazine and pushed the loaded one into the Ingram, charged it with a live round, then lifted up to spot the General.

A rifle spoke sharply, the shot echoing around the chamber, and a chip of rock flew off the granite table beside him.

The General had the AK-47. It had been on single shot that time, but he would fix that quickly.

Rosalyn lay where she was, too injured or too scared to stand. Stone crawled toward the far end of the rock table, well out of the General’s sight line. When he got to the corner, he had moved far enough to get Rosalyn out of the danger zone. He lifted up, his finger ready on the Ingram trigger, his eyes scanning the top of the stone platform and the area just around it.

Stone berated himself as he dropped down again. He had let the emotion of the moment betray him. He had the General cold dead in the market, yet he let him get away. He had overreacted to seeing Rosalyn, and he nearly got them both killed.

A sudden rattle of automatic fire blasted in the closed chamber. Six slugs carved gouges in the rock beside him as he twisted and rolled to the end of the slab of granite.

The General had moved behind him.

Six shots. Stone automatically counted the rounds from the thirty-round magazine in the AK-47. Without conscious thought, he pushed the selector lever

to single shot on the Ingram. Conserve ammo. He was on his last magazine as well.

Carefully, he crawled forward so he could protect Rosalyn and keep the General at bay at the same time. He worked around the Wheel, a medieval torture device, and near the pit where a giant pendulum with a sharp knife on the bottom could be set in motion. He eased into the pit and examined each bit of space, shadow, and rock wall ahead of him.

A battle axe sailed through the air and missed Stone by inches. It clattered against the rock wall and fell to the floor.

"You cannot escape, American!" the General shouted. "I know this dungeon inch by inch. I have weapons all over it!"

"Give it up, General. Most of your men are dead. Half of your castle is blown up. You're through as an opium king."

"I have only *begun* my reign! *You* are the one who is through."

Stone saw him leap up, the automatic rifle already firing. A bullet creased Stone's shoulder, then he was behind the rock wall of the pit. The rounds released a catch somewhere, and the pendulum began to swing back and forth. Stone had no problem staying out of its way.

Another ten shots. The General's magazine was half-empty.

Stone ran to the other side of the pit and jumped out behind an Oriental version of the iron maiden. This diabolical device was more an instrument of execution than of torture. The victim was strapped in half of a box just big enough for the body, then the lid was closed. A dozen steel spikes extended from the lid to the rear of the box. They could be placed in lethal or nonlethal spots.

*Like to get the General in that one*, Stone thought. He peered around it.

"Rosalyn! Can you hear me?"

"Yes." Her voice came weakly. "Mark... thank God—"

"Can you get over here? I'll protect you. I've come to take you home. It's been so long."

"No!" the General screamed, sending a half-dozen rounds at the rack where Rosalyn had been. Nine rounds left for him, Stone counted. The echoes shrilled around the dungeon walls.

Rosalyn slid off the stone platform and crawled toward Mark. He leaned around the iron maiden and fired six rounds where the General had last showed.

Fire and more. The man wouldn't be there now.

Stone reached out and caught Rosalyn's hand and pulled her behind the wood and iron instrument of death.

"It's been so long!" she said softly.

"Yes, but now we have to stay alive." He caught an ancient Chinese lance from the wall behind him and hefted it. Something moved to the left near the end of the rack. He waited. Then he tensed, poising the lance.

A split second later, a figure rose and threw a metal mesh-like net toward the pair.

Stone's throw came at the same moment, and the lance shot forward, glanced off the side of the rock platform, and hit the General with the shaft, smashing into his left arm. He roared in pain, holding his wrist.

The net he had thrown fell short, and Stone raced forward, kicked the AK-47 rifle out of the General's reach, and stared down at him. He lifted the Ingram, determined not to risk losing the man again.

"For all the men you've killed, General. But more important, for all the young people you've hooked on drugs, I'm now executing you."

"No, please don't," Rosalyn shouted. She ran up and stood beside him. "I've seen the General kill dozens of men and even women. He's a monster. Give him to the people. Let the Laotians below have him for a trial."

"No, *no!*" The General screamed. His face became pale. "No, they will tear me apart like wolves."

"Wolves eat their prey," Stone said. "You are so rotten, nobody would touch your carcass."

"Please, Mark. Let his victims have him."

Stone lowered the Ingram. "His supporters will rescue him."

Seeing what he thought was an opening, the General bolted for safety behind the iron maiden. His foot slipped. He pivoted to the left but stumbled and dropped into the pit. His foot was lodged in part of the structure that held the twenty-foot pendulum upright.

The General watched in terror as the pendulum with its sharp blade swung slowly toward him. He was pinned down on top of the torture platform, directly in the line of the deadly blade.

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Stop the pendulum!"

Stone watched the sharp blade coming. The General was caught at the center of the pit, directly over the tie-down straps where victims were placed. He twisted one way, then the other, but could not get free.

"We should stop it," Rosalyn said.

"I don't have the faintest idea how to make it stop," Stone said, a slight smile on his face. "I think when he shot it up a few minutes ago, he broke the brake on it. No way we can stop it now, not with that three-hundred-pound counterbalancing weight on it."

The blade swung forward, half an inch above the General's chest, then passed.

"Get me out of here!" the General bellowed.

"I'm not allowed to touch a general-class officer," Stone said. "I'm just a lowly sergeant."

The pendulum reached its highest point in the swing. A click sounded, and the platform on which the General lay lifted a notch closer to the swinging, razor-sharp blade.

"Now!" the General thundered. "Get me out of here. I'll show you where I have twenty million American dollars! It's yours, all of it. Just get me out of here!"

The pendulum began its fifteen foot downward arc. "Lieutenant James, did this man, the General, kidnap you and hold you in slavery for some thirteen years?"

"Yes... he did."

"Did he mistreat you, hold you against your will, make it impossible for you to communicate with anyone?"

"Yes."

"Then I think he should be held for examination by the legal authorities in Thailand."

“Get me out of here!” The General’s voice turned to a shrieking scream as the blade approached. It sliced through the uniform jacket he wore but missed his flesh.

When the blade passed, he twisted and turned but could move only on his side. This raised his body several inches higher than before. Quickly he moved to his back again.

“All the money, all of it, get my foot free!”

Stone shrugged. “Yeah, I guess we should.”

The mechanism had clicked and lifted the platform and the General’s body an inch higher. He squirmed and tugged but couldn’t free himself. This time the blade sliced through his jacket and touched his chest, bringing a scream of anger and desperation.

Bright red blood stained the uniform. One more swing of the pendulum and the blood flow turned into a torrent. The General screamed, his voice gurgled, and then he spewed blood from his mouth. His face fell to the side.

The General’s torso, just below his rib cage, had been sliced open two inches deep. With the next swing of the blade, he lay still.

Rosalyn looked at him. There were tears in her eyes. “Get me out of here... please.”

Stone picked her up. He carried her up the stone steps. Halfway up he found a landing and put Rosalyn down on a small mattress where the guards usually rested. He bent and kissed her lips.

“I still can’t believe that it’s really you, Mark Stone,” she said softly.

“I’m here and you’re safe and we’re going to get you out of here. First I have to go up there and make sure that it’s safe to move. I have two friends I need to find. I’ll be right back.”

He bent and kissed her again. Rosalyn reached up and clung to him, then nodded.

“I’ve been here for thirteen years waiting for you. I’m not going anywhere in the next half hour.”

When Hog and Loughlin decided to mop up, they didn’t realize how much work it would be. They ran to the top of a two-story building and scanned the area from the roof. Two shots came at them from a second barracks, fifty yards down the courtyard. They poured a dozen rounds into a dark, broken window and waited.

A moment later, two soldiers came out with their hands up and no weapons. Hog ran down the steps and aimed the pair out the gate, where the other Laotians and Vietnamese sat on the ground waiting.

Hog and Terrance decided they had to sweep the whole place. They worked together, clearing rooms and whole buildings. Twice they found soldiers who were still dazed by the explosions. Terrance moved them into the big courtyard and sat them down. Only one more time did they get into a firefight.

Three hard losers had barricaded themselves in a room in a small stone building far down the wall. They fired at Hog on sight and pinned him down.

Loughlin went around the other way and worked up to the fifteen-foot-square building. He put a full cube of C-4 against the center of the big wooden door, set

the detonator for fifteen seconds, and walked around the corner of the heavily-built structure.

The blast smashed the door inward, turning half of the heavy wooden panel into deadly splinters that ripped through the one big room like shrapnel in a steel drum. All three men died instantly from the daggers of wood.

When the sweep had been completed, Hog and Terrance ushered the people back into the courtyard and motioned for them to sit down.

Mark Stone cautiously came out of the door that led to the dungeon, then saw the people in the square and Hog trying to talk to them.

"Wiley, you hardnose, did you clear the area?" Stone called while staying under cover.

"All clear, Sarge. You can come out, now that the work's all done."

A few minutes later, Stone led Rosalyn James out to the square. She rushed forward and hugged two of the Lao women who called to her.

Stone saw that she could speak to them and let her translate for him. He explained that the General had been killed in the attack on the fortress. They were all free to do as they pleased.

Their first job would be to repair the elevator so they could go back to the valley, where they should begin raising agricultural crops, and not opium poppies.

"Nice try, Mark," Rosalyn said. "But you know they'll continue to raise the poppy and sell the opium to someone else."

When everyone understood that they were free to do as they pleased, Rosalyn reminded them that there would still be some jobs to do until they could get down the elevators. Food would need to be prepared, and household duties taken care of. She told them there were many dead who should be buried or taken below.

Afterwards, she found bandages and a first aid kit and bound up Stone's thigh wound and shoulder, which had been bullet-scarred.

Rosalyn stared at him. "I never thought I'd see you again," she said softly.

He kissed her forehead.

"They told me you were K.I.A. Everyone on the chopper was marked down on that list. How did you survive?"

She told him.

"One in a million," he said. "Don't try it again. We have a chopper coming in sometime. Maybe at dawn." He had found a box of flares that could be fired from the AK-47s, and he fired two green ones into the air, waited a half hour, and fired two more.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do," Stone said.

She smiled at him. "Come up to my apartment. I want to see what's left. I have some better clothes than these." She grinned. "And I want to dress up for you."

The apartment had been untouched by the fighting. She closed the windows and the doors, then kissed Mark Stone. Passionately.

"I... hope that helicopter doesn't come for a while," she said.

## Chapter 22

Hog and Loughlin took turns on guard duty on the third floor of the fortress for the rest of the day and that night. They had a box of green flares and two AK-47s all primed to fire. They weren't trying to defend the place. Instead, they listened for the sound of a helicopter.

Hog finally heard a bird coming in about a half hour before daylight. The chopper was a day early, but they had talked about him making a preliminary flyby, just in case.

He fired two green flares, waited two minutes, and fired two more. The bird came closer. It circled in the darkness without lights, like some giant winged beetle.

"Sit it down, stupid!" Hog bellowed at the clattering bird.

He fired three flares then and saw the bird move closer. Then it wheeled, took evasive action, and vanished into the darkness.

"Damn cautious," Hog snarled at Loughlin, who woke up and came out to see what was going on. "Maybe that's how he's lived so long."

"He'll be back when it gets light, to double-check before he sits down," Loughlin said. "He has no plans to walk back to Bangkok."

"Neither have I, buddy," Hog growled, and fired off two more green flares.

With first light, the Laotian women had set up a cafeteria food line, and the ex-military men and the Laotian civilians were all having a light meal.

Right after they ate, twenty men hiked off through the open gate toward the elevator. As soon as they got it repaired, they could go down to the valley and get on with their lives.

Mark Stone came out of the fortress and checked the sky.

"Did I dream that I heard a chopper last night?" he asked.

"You heard one," Hog admitted. "He took a damned good look at us, then hightailed it away. If that was Samersom, he'll be back in the daylight for a positive check."

As Hog spoke they heard the *whup-whup-whup* of a bird and looked over the parapet. The mottled green and brown chopper slid upward, avoiding the dangerous air currents, and held well off from the fortress. Hog fired one more flare, and he and the other two Americans waved their hands over their heads.

Slowly the bird came closer, then the pilot evidently made up his mind and landed quickly in the cleared space below the barracks, inside the wall.

Stone, Hog, and Loughlin walked down to meet him, waiting until the prop wash had died and the dust settled.

Samersom stepped out of the bird, flipping up sunglasses.

"Where the hell you been?" Hog demanded. "We were ready to go for eight hours."

"You're early. How long we staying here?" Samersom asked. "I'm half afraid this needle is going to blow over in the wind."

"She's sturdy enough to stand up under a half case of C-4 blowing," Loughlin said.

Stone went back to the apartment to tell Rosalyn she was going home. He knocked, then went in.

She had been at a window, looking down on the helicopter. Tears seeped from her eyes. "I'm actually going to get out of here?"

Stone put his arms around her and held her tightly.

She looked up at him. "It's almost too much to accept all at once," she gasped. "What am I going to take with us? How much room do I have? I don't even have a suitcase."

"I'll buy you anything you want in Bangkok," he promised.

Five minutes later they were ready to take off. Rosalyn looked at Stone. "Do you suppose he meant it, about that twenty million dollars?"

Stone grinned. "Probably. He could have twice that in a Bangkok bank if we knew how to get it. But I'm not going to waste time looking through the fortress for it. Let's get off this rock."

He motioned for Samersom to lift off. They came down low to the valley and began working through it on their way toward the border.

Hog and Loughlin were both sleeping by the time they had dropped to the valley floor. They were so low they could see the poppy blossoms.

The savage ground fire that suddenly assaulted them was not enough to bother most military choppers that carried special armor around their engines. But Samersom had taken out the armor to increase his payload.

As soon as the first bullet slapped through the chopper, Stone screamed at Samersom.

"Get us the fuck out of here!"

The pilot rammed the throttles forward, and the bird jumped upward and slewed to the left, in a quick defensive move. Round after round hit the metal skin and slashed through. Hog and Wiley were jolted from their sleep.

"Stay down!" he roared at the two men. They hugged the floor, hoping it was thicker than the sides.

They had made it to three hundred feet when the engine began coughing, and Samersom cursed.

"Losing power! I'm afraid we're going down!"

"No!" Stone screamed. "Keep this damn thing flying!"

"Flap your wings, Stone, that might help."

The bird did a quick turn, fell off to the left, and Samersom did his best to control the rapid descent with what little power he had left. The engine kept sputtering and coughing.

They came down too fast, but before they hit, Samersom gunned the engines and the rotor slowed their fall to a reasonable rate just before the skids smashed into a poppy field.

Hog jolted out the cargo door and injured only his pride.

Stone had been holding on and jumped out at once, the Ingram around his neck and an AK-47 in his hands. He looked across the field at a line of brush near a stream.

Somebody had been waiting for them. It had been a set-up. Coleman was the only one who knew where he was going. Coleman, damn him! Coleman had done it again...

"Let's get some weapons out here!" Stone barked. Samersom brought out three AK-47s.



"Can you fix it?" Stone asked.

"Probably not. Sounded like an oil line went out, which means the engine has seized by now. Overheated."

"Bloody long walk," Terrance said.

He kicked a round into the chamber of the rifle, ran forward twenty feet, and faced the brush in a prone position.

Rosalyn jumped out of the chopper and picked up a rifle.

"I used to be pretty good with one of these," she said, jamming in a magazine and levering in a round. "Maybe I haven't forgotten how."

A dozen shots sounded from the trees, and everyone hit the dirt. They pulled back behind the bird, which gave them partial protection.

"Coleman set this up?" Hog yelled.

"My guess," Stone confirmed.

"Make them pay," Loughlin snarled. He sent two rounds of single shots toward the line of brush.

Stone saw the movement. Too late to get in a shot.

"They just sent a squad around to flank us," he growled. "Let's pull back to those trees behind us. We can use a little natural cover."

Hog and Loughlin covered their withdrawal, then dived into the leafy bushes under a hail of rifle fire.

"Shee-it!" Hog growled. "How many of them bastards are out there?"

"I figure about twenty-five to thirty," Loughlin said. "I'm surprised at the weapons. The Viets would have AKs, for damn sure. But these guys... who are they?"

"Maybe some renegade Laos," Samersom suggested.

"Possible," Stone growled. "But more likely Coleman hooked up with some run-and-gun guerillas. Must be thousands of them scattered all over Laos with nowhere to go, and no organization or leadership."

"They got somewhere to go to now," Hog spat, then fired a burst of five rounds at two men who lifted up and ran forward through the poppies. Both of them went down screaming.

"So much for their frontal assault," Loughlin said. He fired once and another head ducked down.

"What's our strategy?" Samersom asked. "I'm not used to this one-on-one fighting."

"First thing we do is try to stay alive," Stone snapped. Rifle fire hammered at them from all three sides. They dug their noses into the moist dirt around the trees.

When the firing stopped, they could see men at the downed chopper, using it as a forward base.

Hog looked at Terrance.

"It all depends how much ammo they have, old man. If they run out before we do, we have a chance. If they don't..." He left it hanging.

"I could talk to them," Rosalyn said. "If they are Laotians, I know enough Lao to talk."

Stone nodded. "Can't hurt a thing. Go for it."

Rosalyn frowned for a moment, then called out clearly in a firm voice in Lao. She called the same sentence twice, then waited. There was silence all around the perimeter, then a voice answered.

“He says we are enemies of the Laotian people.”

“Tell him we have destroyed the Hawk’s Roost and released all of the Laotian slaves that the evil Vietnamese general held in bondage.”

It took Rosalyn three sentences to get the message across.

“The officer says he thanks us, but he and his people are not from this area, it means nothing to them. Their job is to knock down our chopper and capture us.”

“Maybe we could call a truce and buy some time,” Samersom suggested. “Then we could slip away in the darkness.”

“Not a chance,” Stone barked. “These guys know all the tricks. They’ve been living by their wits for the past four or five years, completely on their own. I can’t even figure out how Coleman even contacted them and got them into position so fast.”

“Small country,” Hog said. He looked at Loughlin. “We have any C-4 left? Any grenades?”

Loughlin grinned and began sliding grenades and C-4 from his pants pockets and from inside his shirt. The two worked over the bombs for a minute, pasting the plastic explosive around the bombs as they had before.

Loughlin had the better arm. His first one landed at the edge of the forward group of guerillas. Their death-screams were swallowed in the sudden explosion.

A renewed surge of rifle fire closed in on the five people among the trees.

Stone checked his magazines. He only had two left. The other men were probably about as low. He touched Rosalyn’s hand. “I didn’t mean it to end this way.”

“It hasn’t ended—yet.”

He thought he heard something, listened, and then shook his head. “We can’t even use the wind to help. This area is too moist to start a fire.”

“We could surrender, let them capture us, and buy our way out. If these are guerillas, they’ll do anything for money.”

Stone snorted. “Yeah, that’s why they’re out there, to kill us all. Good old Coleman.”

“Who is Coleman?”

“A CIA agent who’s trying to stop me. I’ve been getting ’Nam M.I.A.s out of the jungle. He doesn’t like it—and he fights dirty.”

He cocked his head.

“When they get on the fourth side of us, this log won’t do us one hell of a lot of good. Look, there goes a squad now! Fire to the rear!” Stone bellowed. “Don’t let them get behind us!”

They all fired that way. Three men dropped. The other five or six retreated to the safety of the woods.

“I did hear something,” Rosalyn said. “A motor.”

Stone frowned and closed his eyes, turned his head, then a frown slanted across his face.

“Anybody got a spare magazine?” Hog asked.

Stone tossed him one.

“Save the ammo. We’re getting company and I don’t know who it is!”

He listened again, then he was sure of it. He could identify that sound anywhere in the world. It was a chopper—a big one, coming in fast, pivoting almost directly overhead. A door-mounted machine gun began stuttering out burst after fiery burst.

## Chapter 23

Stone looked up at the chopper and realized it had no markings, as if they had been hurriedly painted out. For a second, he thought he was dreaming. The bird looked exactly like the Bell UH-1Hs they had used in ‘Nam.

*It was a UH-1D, and it was firing at the guerillas!*

“It’s one of ours!” he shouted, squeezing Rosalyn’s shoulder.

“Got six rounds left,” Hog bellowed over the roar of the bird, as the machine gun hammered lead into the guerillas out the side cargo door. “About time they got here!”

“Keep your head down!” Stone roared, and the ground team started shooting at the guerillas again. The machine gun in the chopper had a deadly effect.

The big copter banked around. Stone saw the gunner clearly through the open door. Gripping the handles and aiming the door-mounted gun was Carol Jenner!

“My God! Look at that girl handle that chatter gun!” Loughlin shouted.

They concentrated on the enemy then, picking off men as they tried to rush away. The last of the guerillas slipped downstream along the brushy creek.

Stone sent a final volley at the troops.

The chopper swung south, chasing the remnants of the guerillas.

Stone looked at his own band. “Anybody hit?”

“This redheaded one is,” Rosalyn said. “I wish I had some bandages.”

“Just a scratch,” Hog blurted. “More worried that the UH might not come back.”

“It’ll be back,” Stone said.

Rosalyn looked at him. “Who is she? She was firing the machine gun from the chopper?”

“Carol. Yes. That’s something we have to talk about.”

“Well, Mark, I didn’t think you’d joined a monastery for the past fourteen years.”

Before he could answer, the big UH-1D swung around and came back, then settled to the ground fifty feet from them in the poppy field, its whooshing blades on low idle.

A woman jumped out the hatch.

Carol. Long-legged, tough, and beautiful in the bright sunlight.

She rushed toward Stone, caught sight of Rosalyn, and slowed. Stone held out his arms. She grinned and jumped into them for a hug. She kissed his cheek, her face beaming.

He let her down.

“Carol Jenner, I think you should meet Rosalyn James, the lady we came to rescue.”

Carol hugged Rosalyn. A woman-to-woman, sister-to-sister hug from the soul.

"I'm so glad Mark found you! It's... wonderful!"

"Hey, Carol, thanks for the bailout," Hog grunted. "Another five minutes and we'd have been poppy fertilizer."

"Rather crudely put, but the idea is there. Old girl, you arrived at precisely the correct moment. We all bloody well owe our lives to you," said Loughlin.

"You're all overreacting just a little," Carol grinned. "Coleman swore he told the men only to capture you."

"So it *was* Coleman," Stone growled. "Knew it had to be that little bastard. I should have broken his neck."

Carol laughed. "He was so miserable he wished he had died. I grilled him for two hours at the embassy before he even admitted that he talked to you."

A .45 automatic fired from the chopper. They all looked over.

"I think the bus driver is waiting," Samersom said. "I'd rather not walk."

They ran for the chopper, taking the AK-47s with them. All six climbed in the bird. Hog fed a new belt of ammo into the door-mounted machine gun just in case and charged a round into the chamber.

"Home, James!" Loughlin said.

Stone sat down beside Carol and Rosalyn. He took Carol's hands in his.

"I don't know how the hell you did it, how you got a bird like this, ammo and all. But we owe our lives to you. I'll never forget it, and I'll never let you forget it."

He paused.

"Now, I want you and Rosalyn to get to know each other. I need to talk to the pilot for a minute."

He went to the second seat up front and held out his hand. "Stone is the name."

"Randolph. I've heard a lot about you, Stone. Glad we were in time to be of some help."

"We are too. You have a route back?"

"Sticking to a range of hills where I don't think there'll be so many meatballs. Don't want to get any more holes in this bird."

"Reasonable. Where do we hit Thailand?"

"Your old stomping grounds, Chiang Khong. We've got about an hour and a half flight."

Stone thanked him and went back to the others.

He sat down between the ladies and scowled at Carol. "Now, lady. You're going to tell me how you found us, and where you got this chopper. These things run a million and a half, even on surplus, when you can find one."

Carol smiled, blonde hair shimmering.

"What got me moving in this direction was some intel I got across my desk about Coleman and his contact with Peter Garrick. The CIA man who got himself killed in your garage was heavily tied in with the fight against the opium trade on the China-Laos border."

"Anything new on how Garrick ended up dead at my house in California?"

"No. I tried, but we'll probably never know. He was working undercover, and it must have caught up with him. He must've learned about Rosalyn when he was over here and tried to get word to you, but his drug connections took him out. Just bad timing, I guess.

“A rider to the intel detailed some of your M.I.A. work and indicated to Coleman that he had ‘the widest possible latitude’ in dealing with one Mark Stone. That’s when I dusted off my old passport and flew to Bangkok.”

“What about this bird?”

“That was harder. I remembered An Khom’s name and at last found him. He already knew about the guerilla force that had been sent to find you. He said he had a friend who had a friend who knew where there was a UH-1D. He provided the route, the machine gun, and all the ammo.”

“You a machine gunner?”

“An Khom had a gunner to go with us, but he got into a fight the night before we left and never showed up. The pilot taught me how to use the gun, and we practiced on some poppy fields on the way over here.”

“The chopper alone and the sound of the MG scared half of them into the bushes,” Loughlin said. “Damn good show!”

Stone glanced at the others. The reaction to the danger, the death, the fighting, had started to set in. It affected each person differently. Hog simply curled up on a cargo mat and went to sleep. Loughlin lay on another mat and stared at the door. He once said he usually thought about his early days on a small British farm, after a mission was completed. Samersom had moved up front to talk to the other pilot.

Carol turned to the side of the chopper. Her shoulders shook as she cried silently. Stone knew there was no way he could help her now. She had killed human beings back there, for the first and probably the last time in her life. It took some getting used to, he knew.

Rosalyn looked at him. He saw tears showing in her eyes, too.

“Is it really over?” she asked softly. The tears flowed down her cheeks then.

“It’s over, Rosalyn. It’s over...”

He held her as she cried. He stroked her long black hair, and thought ahead.

First they would have to check in with the U.S. Embassy. From experience, he knew the State Department would not treat her as a returned M.I.A. They would ask her to handle it all quietly. He would insist on her promotion to at least captain, and probably major, and her discharge and back pay. Yes, that would help.

His own thoughts grew muddled then as the roar of the bird invited sleep. He held Rosalyn and tried to relax. His coming down was always fronted by a worry for his people. Then, when they were safe, he would deal with his *own* feelings.

The idea of somehow expanding his area of operations beyond strictly Southeast Asian M.I.A.-P.O.W. missions continued to pester his subconscious, but first there were his legal problems, not to mention his trouble with the CIA.

And Carol, beautiful Carol, whom he loved; with whom he had been through so much; who had given so much of herself to his M.I.A. hunter cause... She was putting on a good show, but there was so much that had to be dealt with...

He wished he had a better handle on understanding his tangled feelings for these two good, fine women. But he had done all he could for now, he told himself. Time would have to take care of the rest.

He thought about Coleman. There was a debt to be paid. They all could have been killed in the crash. The insurance would provide Samersom with a new bird, but there was more. He owed that little snake.

He tried to get his mind back to a practical level, but it wandered and wavered, and for a moment he slept. He came awake with someone kissing him.

“Mark! Mark, we’re about to land! We’re out of Laos. We’re in Thailand!”

Stone looked at the beautiful face, inches in front of his, and kissed it back. He leaned away so he could focus and found Rosalyn there. And for him, the past fourteen years somehow vanished.

Things were clear to him now. He watched them slide into the small grass field where they had taken off from. They would refuel here and fly on to Bangkok. There, they would check in briefly with the embassy, to start getting the paperwork going for a passport for Rosalyn—or military orders—whichever the State Department wanted to do. Then they would find a pleasant, out-of-the-way hotel and let Rosalyn begin to get acquainted with freedom and the modern world.

Stone closed his eyes.

There had to be more M.I.A.s out there in the jungle. If he could only get some locations, some sightings. Maybe An Khom would hear about another sighting. If he could tie down any more M.I.A.s, he would be back over here within hours to track them down and bring them out.



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<sup>(3-1)</sup> Navy Seal talk for getting some enemy blood on you when you do a close-up job with a knife.