

# **SNIPE HUNT**

**A VIET NAM WAR NOVEL**



**DAVID ALLIN**

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## Table of Contents

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)





# ONE

Nash jerked when Hatley jabbed him in the back with his elbow and urgently whispered, "Movement!" The two of them were sitting at the top of a thirty-foot wooden tower in a six-foot-square cupola with sandbag walls, waiting for the sun to rise. Nash raised his XM-21 sniper rifle to his shoulder and clicked on the starlight scope, listening to the high-pitched whine as it spun up. He had been half asleep, exhausted by the long overnight stint in the tower staring down the length of the straight dirt road that ran beneath them, and normally such a warning would have sent a thrill of excitement through him, but not this time. Hatley had reported seeing things all night long, only to decide they were animals, shadows, or maybe even ghosts. He had cried wolf too many times for Nash to become agitated now. He just rolled his eyes in the darkness and waited for further information.

Specialist Fourth Class Ignacio "Nash" Jaramillo had just graduated from the sniper training school at Cu Chi, and this was his first assignment as a sniper. Previously he had been an infantryman with a battalion near Tay Ninh, but had volunteered to be a sniper, a decision he was now beginning to regret. He had been teamed up with SP4 Chuck Hatley, who had been in the previous training cycle and was presumably more experienced than Nash at this new business of being a sniper. The US Army hadn't really utilized snipers since the Korean War, and still wasn't sure just how to deploy them. The initial plan was to assign snipers to every infantry squad, essentially employing them as simply enhanced riflemen, but that hadn't worked out well in Viet Nam, where most battles were fought at close range. The Marines up north in I Corps were using snipers as hunter-killer teams, but the Army was slow to accept that paradigm. Instead, at least here in III Corps, snipers were being set up in towers along the main supply convoy routes to discourage the communists from planting mines and booby-traps at night. The number of supply trucks hitting mines was down, so apparently it was

working, but it was a boring job. This was Nash's fifth night on the tower, and he had seen no targets yet, nor anything else of interest, other than an occasional dog or water buffalo.

Hatley, however, saw lots of targets, or at least thought he did. Hatley was a mountain boy from West Virginia, a thin, freckle-faced high school dropout who happened to be a crack shot with a rifle. He also had a vivid imagination and a drive to prove himself. He had been confused when he was introduced to Nash, first by his name, and then by his home state.

"Jar-a-mellow," Hatley had said, reading Nash's name tape.

"Hahr-a-miyo," Nash had corrected him. "Ignacio Jaramillo, but you can call me 'Nash'. I'm from Espanola, New Mexico. Where are you from?"

"You're a Mexican?" Hatley had asked suspiciously.

"New Mexican," Nash patiently explained. "You know, Santa Fe, Albuquerque."

"How'd you get in the U. S. Army?"

"I was drafted," Nash said, with a touch of exasperation. He wasn't surprised, however. He had long ago gotten used to the geographic ignorance of the many Americans, especially those from east of the Mississippi, who believed that New Mexico was a foreign country. It had taken several minutes, and a small map of the United States, to convince Hatley that Nash was truly an American citizen.

"You speak English real good," Hatley said in an inadvertently back-handed compliment. "Do you speak Mexican, too?"

"I speak some Spanish," Nash admitted, "most of which I learned in high school."

"Huh," Hatley had replied, obviously out of his depth of understanding. "Okay. Well, let's go shoot us some Charlies."

And so for five nights he and Hatley had sat in the tower along Route 1 north of Cu Chi, ready to shoot any Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldier dumb enough to walk out into the middle of the road in sight of the tower to plant a mine. Tonight a three-quarter moon was still high in sky, bathing the arrow-straight road in pale blue light that revealed absolutely

nothing going on there. But Hatley had seen something, or dreamed something, so Nash pushed the starlight scope's eyepiece with his brow and let his eye adjust to the grainy green image that appeared. Slowly sweeping the rifle back and forth, he scanned the road, the cleared area on either side of the road, and the edge of woods that surrounded this stretch of the highway. The amplified light of the scope still found nothing of interest.

"What have you got?" Nash asked Hatley in a soft whisper, still looking through the scope.

"Gook with a weapon," Hatley responded, his voice tight and higher in pitch.

"What kind of weapon?"

"Not sure. Long gun, I think. Got a pack on his back."

Now Nash was more concerned. It sounded like Hatley might actually have a target. He wanted to turn around and check it out himself, but that was against protocol. His job in this situation was to cover Hatley's back and ensure no other enemy soldiers were approaching from the other direction.

"What's he doing?" Nash asked as quietly as he could manage.

"Jest walkin' down the road, happy as you please," Hatley whispered. "I'm gonna take him."

"You sure he's. . ." Nash started to ask, but the pop of Hatley's rifle followed by the snap and click of the bolt and the clink of the ejected brass made his question moot. His and Hatley's rifles both had suppressors, so the rifle's report was muted, but the sound of the bolt action was still very evident.

"Got him!" Hatley crowed, far louder than necessary. "Dropped him like a sack of flour! Who-eee!"

"You sure?" Nash asked, still whispering and hoping Hatley would take the hint.

"Oh, yeah. I kin see the blood poolin' in the dirt. He's a goner." Hatley had at least lowered his voice to a normal conversational level. "I'm gonna go check him out." Hatley started to stand up, but Nash quickly twisted around and dragged him back down.

"Stay here," he warned. "There might be more of them."

“Good thinkin’,” Hatley agreed, and resumed a good firing position. “We’ll wait till it gets light. Won’t be long now.”

And it wasn’t long. A half hour later the sky began to lighten, and finally the sun peeked up over the distant flat horizon, throwing long shadows across the road. While he packed away his starlight scope and reattached his daytime scope sight, Nash turned enough to see the crumpled unmoving shape in the middle of the road behind him, about two hundred meters away. A few minutes earlier Nash had used their radio to call in the kill, and they had been instructed to stay in the tower until they were relieved. Hatley, however, couldn’t wait. As soon as they saw the dust plume of approaching vehicles, Hatley had put on his backpack and scrambled down the ladder to the ground. Resigned to the inevitable, Nash gathered up his own gear and the radio and made his way down, glad to be no longer confined and now able to stretch his legs. While Nash adjusted his pack and the radio, Hatley scampered off down the road toward the body. Nash trudged wearily after him, watching the jeep and tall Commando armored car that were coming to meet them. He reached Hatley just as the two vehicles skidded to a stop a few yards away, enveloping them in a cloud of tan dust.

Hatley was standing over the body, his shoulders slumped, his head down, muttering “Oh, shit,” over and over again. Nash looked down and immediately understood. The body was that of a very old man, his white scraggly beard splattered with blood. Next to him lay a fishing pole, and on his back was the conical straw hat worn by most Vietnamese to ward off the sun, hanging by a string around his neck. The villagers had been warned repeatedly that during the curfew hours of darkness, anyone seen outside the village was assumed to be an enemy soldier and would be shot on sight, but this old man had ignored the warnings in order to be at his favorite fishing hole bright and early.

“Aw, hell,” Captain Banning said as he walked up to them from the jeep. Banning was their commander, a tall lanky man who had other duties at Brigade Headquarters, and didn’t seem all that enthused about being in charge of the sniper teams as well. His driver also came up, saw what the problem was, and walked back to the jeep shaking his head. The MPs in the armored car stayed put, guarding against a possible ambush from the woods.

“I coulda swore he was a VC, Captain,” Hatley bleated, obviously fighting back tears. Banning looked over at Nash with a raised eyebrow, and

Nash just shrugged.

“I didn’t see him,” Nash explained quietly. “I was watching the other direction.”

Banning nodded. “Let’s get him out of the middle of the road,” he ordered, “before the convoys come through.” Nash took Hatley’s arm and led him to the side of the road where they could ground their packs and rifles; Nash had to prod Hatley in the back to get him to return to the old man’s body. Solemnly they lifted the body by its arms and legs, an easy task due to the thin man’s miniscule weight, and carried him over to lay him gently down in the weeds. Banning had gone back to the jeep and was talking on the radio.

“He. . . he looked like a VC,” Hatley blubbered, staring down at the body. “I thought that pole was a rifle, and his hat looked like a pack. He weren’t s’posed to be out here. Right?”

“No,” Nash reassured him, “he wasn’t supposed to be out before it got light.”

“Am I gonna get in trouble?”

“I don’t know. He was violating curfew, so technically he was asking for it. But now the Army will have to explain to his family. Probably pay them off, too.”

“Shit! God-damn!” Hatley just stood there, his arms hanging loose at his side. Nash could see tears running down Hatley’s dusty cheeks. He didn’t know how to comfort the distraught young man, especially since he felt Hatley had been too anxious to kill someone in the first place. He placed his hand on Hatley’s shoulder, which caused Hatley to break out in sobs.

Captain Banning came up, looking with thinly-veiled disgust at Hatley, and told them to put their gear in the jeep. “My driver will take you back to Cu Chi,” he told them. “I’ll wait here with the MPs for the ambulance and the Civil Action people.”

Nash bent down and picked up his gear and rifle, but Hatley hesitated. He gave Nash a pleading look. “Will you take my rifle?” he asked plaintively. “I don’t want to touch it.” Nash nodded and picked it up as well, struggling to juggle the radio, backpack, and two rifles. Hatley picked up his own back pack and shuffled toward the jeep. Nash knew it was petty, but he

thought that Hatley could have at least offered to carry the radio.

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“Let’s get a cup of coffee at the mess hall,” Garfield suggested in a way that sounded more like an order. The small red-haired colonel led the way out of the underground Tactical Operations Center without looking back to see if the other two were following. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Carswell, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) adviser to the Binh Duong province chief, glanced over at Colonel Dennis Aikens and they exchanged shrugs as they followed Colonel Rufus James Garfield out into the bright sunshine. Garfield was the brigade commander for 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division here in Dau Tieng, and had agreed to meet with Aikens, a brigade commander from First Infantry Division, along with Carswell, about a situation in the Michelin rubber plantation, just northeast of Dau Tieng.

Despite the fact that Garfield was much shorter than the other two officers, they had to hurry to keep up with him as he strode quickly over to the mess hall, a long low wooden building nearby. Inside he led them past the serving line, empty at this time of day, to a table at the back, while signaling to the cook who had come from the kitchen to see what was going on. The cook scurried over to the coffee pots and quickly brought them a tray with three steaming cups of coffee, along with spoons, sugar, and creamer. Without a word he set down the tray and retreated to the kitchen. It appeared he was accustomed to doing this.

“So, what’s the deal?” Garfield demanded as each took his coffee from the tray. Carswell preferred his coffee with sugar, but took it black this time, since the other two men ignored the flavorings.

“Rich says the locals have some intel on the Michelin,” Aikens said, nodding toward Carswell. “Supposedly there is someone or something important coming down from Cambodia next week. We checked with G-2, and they admit they’ve heard something about it, too.”

“Like what?” Garfield asked impatiently.

Aikens looked at Carswell, giving him permission to speak.

“It’s not really clear,” Carswell explained. “The communists refer to a

code name that could be a person, or could be something else, like a new type of weapon. They definitely seem excited about it, whatever it is.”

“That’s what G-2 says,” Aikens agreed. “Whatever it is, or who it is, they seem to think it is a major deal. And it’s supposed to be coming through the Michelin. Higher thinks we ought to try and intercept it somehow.”

Garfield took a sip of coffee and scowled even more than usual. “So, what are you thinking? A big joint operation? Several battalions? I got to tell you, I’m pretty tied up with other missions right now.”

Aikens shook his head. “No, we’re pretty busy right now, too. What I was thinking of, is maybe use our new snipers. Deploying big units in the Michelin is always a waste of time, because the gooks know they’re coming and just go to ground. We could run some snipers in there, though, and have them pick off whoever is coming through.”

“Is your intel good enough to place the snipers where we need ‘em?” Garfield asked, obviously doubtful.

“We think so,” Carswell said. “We’ve had a defector who has given us the likely routes that will be taken, and the approximate dates.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Garfield began, clearly not expecting anyone to actually do that, “but we’ve never used snipers like that. I know the Marines do, but not us. And do we even have enough snipers trained yet?”

“This would also be an experiment,” Aikens admitted. “We send in a single team, and see what they can accomplish in that sort of deployment. The snipers have been good at reducing the mining of the supply routes, but not so much when deployed with regular infantry units. This way, we can show we’re responding to the intel, we’re trying out new tactics, and at the same time we’re not tying up our other assets.”

Carswell stayed silent, but now realized what was really going on. The regular Army guys never trusted intelligence gleaned from defectors, and these two were just trying to go through the motions without committing any of their precious infantry units. They didn’t really expect any results, but needed to appear as if they were making a real effort. Carswell mentally shrugged. A sniper team wasn’t much, but at least someone would be out there trying to intercept whatever the high-value target was.

# TWO

The rain beat down on the corrugated tin roof of the barracks hooch with a clattering thunder that drowned out the small portable radio playing on his bunk. Nash was sitting on a metal folding chair at a small wooden folding table the Army called a field desk, cleaning his rifle. He had just finished reassembling it and was wiping it down with a rag to get the last of the gun oil off the stock. He was the only person in the hooch, a long wooden structure with slatted wood walls that only went up halfway to the roof; screens went the rest the of the way, to allow plenty of ventilation. The floor was a poured concrete slab, mostly dry, but with a few puddles forming under roof leaks.

Nash worked the bolt of the rifle back and forth, listening carefully over the noise of the rain for the proper snick-snack of the action. The XM-21 sniper rifle was, in appearance at least, a standard issue M-14 just like Nash had trained on in Basic at Ft. Sill, and like those still issued to soldiers in Europe and Korea. Most soldiers in Viet Nam, however, were using the new M-16. The difference with the XM-21 was that it had been “accurized,” transformed into the best M-14 possible. All the metal parts had been selected for their quality, and then milled, polished, and perfected further so they worked flawlessly every time. The wooden stock had been baked to remove moisture and sealed with epoxy so there was no chance for it to swell or warp in the demanding conditions of Viet Nam. A special telescopic sight had been developed, one that combined a Redfield commercial scope with a Leatherwood mounting system that together constituted the Adjustable Ranging Telescope, or ART. With this system, when the focus of the sight was changed, it automatically raised or lowered the scope’s aiming point to compensate; thus the crosshairs were always centered on the target regardless of the range.

The ART scope was easily dismountable without losing its zero, and a starlight scope could be mounted for night missions. A bipod was normally attached to the barrel just beyond the fore stock. Nash also had a silencer,

more accurately called a suppressor, that was normally mounted on the end of the barrel. The suppressor greatly reduced the sound of the shot and eliminated most of the muzzle flash, thus making it harder for the enemy to return fire. With the ART scope, the rifle was easily accurate out to 900 meters, and with the starlight it was good out to about 300 meters, but the suppressor blocked the use of the iron sights, so closer ranges were problematic. That's why Nash also carried an M1911 .45 caliber automatic pistol in a holster on his web belt.

Since he had just finished cleaning it, the rifle did not have the suppressor, bipod, or scope attached. Bringing the rifle to his shoulder, Nash sighted down the barrel, feeling the pressure of the butt against his muscles, the stock weld of his cheek against the wood, the grip of his hands, the cool metal of the trigger on the tip of his finger. It just felt right. Nash had grown up with rifles, from his first BB-gun, to a .22, to larger caliber hunting rifles. His dad was an avid hunter, and they often went out into the mountains of northern New Mexico to hunt deer and elk. Nash loved the solid feel of a rifle, the hidden power and potential of it, and the finely honed mechanical workings that made it operate. His XM-21 had become almost a biomechanical extension of himself, a vital part of his being that somehow made him more than just an ordinary soldier. He was proud of his skill with the rifle, and loved to shoot at the target range. What he tried not to think about was how he would feel when he had to actually shoot at another human being.

And that thought made him look over at the empty cot next to his. That had been Hatley's bunk. After last week's incident on Route 1, Hatley had packed up his gear, turned in his rifle, and departed for points unknown. All anyone would say was that he had asked to be reassigned. Hatley hadn't spoken to Nash or anyone else in the barracks; he had packed in silence, avoiding everyone's eyes, and hurried away. Nash wondered how he himself would have reacted in such a situation, and hoped he would handle it better than Hatley had. He convinced himself that he wouldn't have shot the old man in the first place, but deep down he knew such an accident could happen to anyone. And maybe that was why Captain Banning and Sergeant First Class Martinson, his platoon sergeant, had been surreptitiously keeping an eye on him. Nash guessed they were watching him to see if he, too, had been emotionally impacted by the shooting. Ostensibly he had been kept in camp

to clean his equipment and re-zero his rifle, but that monthly service wasn't actually due yet. Nash didn't mind, though, because he liked the target shooting, and he liked sleeping on a cot out of the rain every night, and eating in the mess hall every day.

The screen door to the hooch squealed, and Nash looked up to see a soldier in a dripping poncho step into the building and pull back the hood. Nash didn't recognize the guy.

"Are you Jaramillo?" the man asked. His pronunciation was poor, but at least it was recognizable, so Nash elected to not correct him. Nash set the rifle down on the table and nodded. "Captain Banning wants to see you. ASAP." The man pulled the hood back up and scampered out into the rain, letting the screen door slam behind him.

Nash sighed. He got up and went over to his cot to retrieve his prized rifle bag. It was a civilian model, beautifully made of tan canvas and dark brown leather. Nash had bought it from a guy who was DEROSing and going back to the States. The guy had told him his folks had sent it to him, but when he got home, he planned to never touch a rifle again, so he no longer needed the bag. Nash was elated to acquire it. It was made for a hunting rifle, but he could easily squeeze his XM-21 into it, and there were various pockets which he used for the scope, the suppressor, and several magazines. It even had a long strap so he could carry it across his back. The Army didn't provide bags or cases for the sniper rifles, but Nash insisted on keeping his as pristine as possible, especially since his life might depend on it. After putting the rifle in the bag and zipping it up, he laid the heavy rifle bag on his cot and put away his cleaning supplies, straightened his sleeping area, and pulled on his own poncho. The rain had eased a little, but it was still coming down hard enough to warrant the poncho.

Banning's office was in the secondary Brigade headquarters bunker, not far from the TOC, the tactical operations center, and since there were a lot of officers around, Nash took off his poncho when he entered and straightened his uniform. A clerk told him Banning was in the conference room and pointed him in the right direction. When he entered the cramped underground room, lit by bare light bulbs hanging from the overhead wooden beams, he found Banning standing with two other men, both of whom wore

First Infantry Division patches on their shoulders.

“Here he is,” Banning announced upon seeing Nash, which Nash guiltily took as a rebuke for being late. “Specialist Jaramillo, this is Lieutenant Harrison and Sergeant Jefferson, from the Big Red One.” Nash shook their hands as he looked them over. Harrison was a butter-bar, a second lieutenant who looked younger than Nash, like he hadn’t even started shaving yet. He had sandy blond hair, bright blue eyes, and the earnest expression of someone trying to live up to expectations. Jefferson was a buck sergeant, E-5, and a soul brother. He was about Nash’s age and height, but slender in build; his grip, however, indicated he was stronger than he looked. His hair was just long enough that it could charitably be called an Afro, but short enough to be within Army regulations. He gave the impression he was competent, confident, and maybe a little annoyed.

“Why don’t we all sit down,” Banning suggested, motioning toward a circle of folding chairs near an easel with butcher-block paper on it. Nash took a chair next to Banning, with Jefferson on his right and Harrison across from him. He suppressed a smile as he realized Harrison reminded him of the earnest but inept young lieutenant in the Beetle Bailey comic strip. Banning reached over and flipped back a couple pages on the easel until it revealed a detailed hand-drawn map of the Michelin rubber plantation. Nash had an instant feeling of dread. The Michelin, which stretched for miles north and east from Dau Tieng, was a notorious sanctuary for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. It was sometimes referred to as the VC National Forest.

“The Division Commander,” Banning began, “is concerned about the continuing influx of arms and supplies that are coming from Cambodia and filtering down through the Michelin toward Saigon. Because the United States has made a commitment to avoid damaging the plantation, for political and economic reasons, we can’t use the normal methods of interdiction, such as defoliants or Rome Plows. Running RIFs and sweeps during the daytime hasn’t proved very effective, and since our forces inside the rubber can’t be supported by artillery or air, sweeps at night are too risky.” Nash felt like he was back in high school, listening to the history teacher drone on and on. Harrison was frowning with concentration, hanging on Banning’s every word. A glance to his right showed Nash that Jefferson was just as bored as he was.

Banning cleared his throat and continued. "Currently the Michelin is in the First Division's AO, but it looks like that may be changing. Regardless, Twenty-Fifth has often participated in joint operations there, since the plantation borders our own AO, and the general thinks that working with First would benefit both Divisions and greatly assist reaching the stated goals of III Corps. That's why Lieutenant Harrison and Sergeant Jefferson are here today. Specialist Jaramillo," Banning addressed Nash, "Sergeant Jefferson here is also a trained sniper, having been through the first training class here in Cu Chi a couple months ago. He already has two kills to his credit, and is familiar with the Michelin."

Nash had thought Jefferson looked familiar, but with everyone wearing the same uniform and wearing hats or helmets, that was a common impression. Looking closer, he recognized Jefferson from the sniper rifle range, where the black man had just finished zeroing his rifle and was leaving as Jaramillo arrived. And when he was in training, Nash had heard rumors about a Big Red One sniper who was already successful.

"I've been in the Michelin," Jefferson admitted, "but I wouldn't say I'm real familiar with it. Before I became a sniper, my unit did a couple sweeps there, but I haven't been back since."

"He took out two VC sappers," Harrison interjected proudly. "That undoubtedly saved lives for the supply convoy."

Jefferson looked embarrassed. "No big deal," he demurred. Nash didn't know what to say to that, and apparently neither did Banning, so the room went silent for a moment. Finally Banning changed the subject.

"Okay, well, here's the general's idea. We'll place sniper teams in the rubber at various locations to provide ground-based H&I fire." H&I, Nash knew, was Army jargon for harassment and interdiction, normally carried out by artillery. Cannons and howitzers would fire a pattern of rounds into an area suspected of containing an enemy encampment or along an infiltration route, in the hopes of randomly hitting something, or at least disrupting and dissuading the enemy from using that area. Nash thought it was really just a way for the arty guys to waste ammo and get practice. With the restrictions on fire into the Michelin, artillery H&I wasn't allowed. In addition, the rubber trees provided a solid overhead canopy that prevented airborne surveillance and attack as well. Much as he hated to admit it, using snipers

for H&I in the rubber made a modicum of sense. Unless you were one of the snipers who had to figure out how to escape the inevitable retribution without any air or arty support.

“How is that going to work?” Jefferson asked, obviously foreseeing the same problems as Nash.

“The teams will consist of two snipers,” Banning said, nodding at Nash and Jefferson, “along with two spotters who will provide security. The four of you will ride in with a mech unit that’s doing a RIF through the rubber, and they will drop you off at a preselected location where you will go to ground until nightfall, and then move out to your designated firing position.”

A RIF, Nash knew, was a reconnaissance in force, during which a bunch of armored personnel carriers would speed through an area in line abreast, hoping to catch some gooks unawares, or at least draw fire so they could have something to attack. They were a common occurrence, and thus would provide good cover for the insertion of the snipers.

“For how long?” Nash asked. “Would they pick us up the next day?”

“Uh, no, the general was thinking you would be out there for five days, moving from position to position, to achieve the maximum effect.”

“Five days,” Jefferson repeated, and chewed his lower lip. “Gonna have to carry a lot of food and water, unless we can get a resupply.”

“You’ll have lurp rations, and since it’s the rainy season, you should be able to collect enough rain water to sustain you.” Banning was trying to sound confident, but Nash suspected he, too, has his doubts. “Lurp” was the way soldiers pronounced LRRP, short for long-range reconnaissance patrols, for whom the military had developed freeze-dried foods that were light and easy to carry. To eat them, however, you had to add water, so the weight savings was negated by the need for extra canteens. Collecting rain water was difficult in the field, and depended too much on changing weather conditions. It was easy for the general and his staff to think that would work, but Nash and Jefferson were the ones who would actually have to survive that way. Nash noticed that Banning ignored the question of a resupply. Nash knew that in the Michelin, resupply would be almost impossible, due, again, to the lack of open areas where a helicopter could land.

“How many teams are doing this?” Nash asked, afraid to hear the

answer.

“You’re the first,” Banning said, confirming Nash’s suspicions. “We’re depending on you to prove the concept will work.”

*So we’re human guinea pigs*, Nash thought. He locked eyes with Jefferson for a moment, as they mentally shared their reservations.

“When do we go out?” Jefferson asked. Nash detected the trepidation in Jefferson’s voice.

“Four days from today, Friday,” Banning said, turning to the map. “The APCs will move out from Dau Tieng and drop you off approximately here.” He pointed to a spot on the map. “Your first observation post will be here, near the middle of the plantation. G-2 has provided a list of locations they feel will provide the best opportunities, and those will all be marked on your map. On the fourteenth you will return to the drop-off point for pick up around noon. Until then, you’ll need to call in sitreps every six hours, at six, twelve, eighteen, and twenty-four hundred hours.”

Banning paused while Jefferson pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and jotted down the details with a ball-point pen. When Jefferson looked up, Banning squinted like he was making a decision, and then continued. “Uh, there’s one more thing. G-2 thinks that there’s going to be some sort of special activity during those five days. Maybe a high-ranking NVA officer, maybe a shipment of weapons, or something else. They’re not sure what it is, but want you to keep an eye out for anything unusual. Based on their intelligence, they picked your positions and dates, so hopefully you can destroy or disrupt whatever it is.”

The following day Jefferson was brought by jeep to the sniper team barracks in Cu Chi, along with all his gear. Nash pointed him to Hatley’s old cot, and the young soul brother quickly made himself at home. An hour later two more soldiers arrived, a big guy with a 25<sup>th</sup> Division patch, and a skinny Italian-looking guy wearing the olive drab shield with a big red numeral one on it. The big guy introduced himself as Harv Albertson, and the other guy was Anthony Mazzola. Albertson was a PFC, private first class, and Mazzola a Spec Four, specialist fourth class. Nash found cots for them, and then they gathered around the small table to get to know each other.

Nash explained his name to the new guys, and gave a minimal amount of background information about his New Mexico upbringing, where he had done a lot of hunting in the mountains. He told them he had worked at a small garage after he graduated from high school, until he was drafted. He had been assigned to a regular infantry unit upon arrival in-country, but his skill with the M-16 had been noted by his superiors, and soon he had been asked to volunteer for sniper training.

Jefferson told them all to call him “Trey,” said he was from St. Louis, and told them he had originally been assigned to Germany, but had since been transferred to Viet Nam. After a few months in a mechanized battalion, he had volunteered for the sniper training, and had been sitting on the road guard towers since. When Nash asked about his two kills, Jefferson downplayed their significance, saying he had shot at two VC trying to plant a mine in the road, and they had blown themselves up diving for cover. Nonetheless, the action had gotten him promoted to sergeant.

Albertson was a few years older than the others, because he had attended college for three years before getting drafted due to poor grades. He said he was from upstate New York and admitted to playing football in high school and college, but not well enough to get a scholarship. Despite his size and football background, Albertson, who preferred to be called “Harv,” was mild-mannered and unassuming.

Mazzola told them to call him Tony, and said he was from Seattle. His hawk-nosed face bore the scars of recent bouts with acne, and he tended to bluster and complain in a manner Nash associated with people from New York City, for some reason. Nonetheless he seemed competent and sociable.

Observing the way they looked and talked, Nash concluded they would probably work well together out in the field. He had worried about that, because it was a common practice in the Army for commanders to use requests for special assignment volunteers as a way to get rid of the bad apples in their units. Jefferson had a quiet authority about him, and Nash suspected he had not always been a model citizen back in St. Louis. From his speech patterns, Nash decided Trey was both intelligent and street smart, a potent combination. Nash was glad Trey was in charge of the mission, because Nash wasn’t all that self-confident himself. In high school he had been pretty much a loner, and even here in the Army, where everyone was forced to be part of a group, he still felt a little like an outsider. Nash was

also haunted by the lingering specter of the priest who had tried to molest him when he was in training as an altar boy.

Harv was an interesting character. Although ostensibly highly educated, he came across as kind of goofy and anxious to please, like your best friend's kid brother. Six feet tall, stocky and muscular, he looked a football lineman, which was what he had been in school. He had partied too much to keep up his grades in college, he told them, and lost his student deferment in his junior year. He wished he had taken ROTC, which would have protected him from the draft. At twenty-one, Harv was the oldest man on the team, but didn't act like it. His assigned weapon was an M-79 grenade launcher, a short-barreled shotgun-like weapon that looked like a toy in his big hands. Harv smiled a lot, but didn't have much to say.

Mazzola, on the other hand, was very loquacious, in a sometimes snide sort of way. Although just as tall as Harv, Tony was rail thin and wiry, much like the Ichabod Crane character in Disney's Headless Horseman movie. He had volunteered before they drafted him, and was gung ho about being in the Army and especially about this assignment. He did not, however, strike Nash as an intellectual giant.

When Trey explained the mission to the new members of the team, they both had questions.

"So what exactly are we looking for?" Harv asked, a quizzical expression wrinkling his face.

"Not sure," Trey admitted. "Could be anything, according to the intel guys."

"So we're going on a snipe hunt?" Tony sneered.

"A what?" Harv asked, shaking his head.

"A snipe hunt." Tony sighed. "Like on Spin and Marty. You send guys out in the woods to hunt snipe, but there really aren't any, so they're just wasting their time."

Spin and Marty, Nash now remembered, was a series of short episodes on The Mickey Mouse Club show about young boys at a summer camp. And he had to admit, their current mission did seem like it might be a snipe hunt.

The screen door of the barracks squeaked open and they looked over to see Captain Banning escorting a young Vietnamese man into the room. The

Vietnamese guy was wearing American-style jungle fatigues that had been tailored to fit and a boonie hat, and he carried a lumpy cloth bag.

“Hey, fellows,” Banning said as he brought the Vietnamese guy over, “this here is Nguyen Van Quan. He’ll be going out with you.”

Nash and Trey exchanged looks of surprise and dismay. No one had said anything about a fifth member of the team, especially one who was Vietnamese. Quan shyly smiled at them, but there was a little fear in his eyes as well.

“He’s a Chieu Hoi,” Banning continued. An approximate translation of Chieu Hoi was “open arms,” and it was a program that encouraged Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers to defect to the Saigon government, in return for which they might receive farm land or other inducements. The actual name for such defectors themselves was Hoi Chanh, but GIs routinely just called them Chieu Hois. Some of them volunteered to accompany American infantry units as guides, called Kit Carson scouts. This Quan was apparently one of those. “Quan knows the Michelin,” Banning said.

Jefferson jumped up. “Can I talk to you a minute, sir?” he said with barely concealed anger, motioning for Banning to join him outside the barracks.

“Uh, sure, sergeant,” Banning replied, looking a little abashed. The two went outside, and although Nash couldn’t make out the words, the tone of the conversation was very heated. He felt sure he knew what the argument was about. Trey didn’t want Quan on the team, and Nash understood why. GI’s didn’t trust the Chieu Hois, figuring that if they betrayed their original buddies, they were likely to betray their new ones. Nash was a little more willing than Trey to give Quan a chance, but was suspicious nonetheless. Quan was only about five feet tall, slender, and had a boyish face. He kept smiling nervously as the men outside argued, and the men inside stared at him with curiosity.

Finally the heated words stopped and Jefferson stomped back inside while Banning left. Nash could tell from the look of disgust on Trey’s face that he had lost the argument. His eyes blazing, Trey came up to Quan and glared at him. “So what’s your story?” he demanded.

Quan quailed and stepped back, but then straightened his back and replied, “I was Viet Cong, but I not want to be. They say if I not join, they

hurt my sister. She dead now, so I escape. I go to training, and now I am soldier for you.” He dropped his bag and reached in his pants pocket to pull out a small American flag. Only then did Nash notice that Quan was missing two fingers on his left hand. “I hate communist,” Quan stated proudly, holding the flag by two corners to spread it out.

Trey lowered his eyelids as he continued to stare at Quan, and then broke out into laughter. Nash and the others joined him. It seemed ludicrous for the little Vietnamese to be waving the American flag like that so earnestly. Quan was taken aback by the laughter, but apparently realized he was not being ridiculed and relaxed.

“What happened to your fingers?” Trey asked, pointing at the damaged hand.

“VC,” Quan replied tersely, his expression clouding over. “I no talk about it.”

“Okay,” Trey said, nodding. “So where’s your gear?”

“Gear?” Quan looked down at the bag by his feet. “That all they give me.”

“Well, shit,” Harv said with disgust. “You’ll need more than that.”

“Does he get a weapon?” Tony asked uncertainly.

“Chieu Hois don’t get weapons,” Nash told him. “It’s a rule.” Quan nodded.

“Yeah,” Trey said, “but you’ll need more than just that little bag. I’ll go to Supply.”

When Trey returned an hour later, he was rolling his eyes in disgust. “Sorry bastard won’t issue anything for gooks, he says. No offense, Quan. I guess we’ll have to make some midnight requisitions.”

From the puzzled look on Tony’s face, Nash realized the guy was unfamiliar with that particular phrase and its meaning. In the Army, virtually everything a soldier had was government property, issued through Supply. That was why soldiers were called GI’s—government issue. Soldiers further interpreted that to mean that all government property was therefore owned by no one, and thus the property of whomever had temporary possession of it. If a soldier needed a helmet, and he found one that wasn’t on someone’s head at

the moment, and it didn't belong to one of his buddies, it was perfectly acceptable to "acquire" it while no one was looking. GIs looked at it as simply redistributing the wealth and ensuring that those who needed something had it.

Nash had learned this principle while in Basic Training at Ft. Sill. His platoon was housed in Quonset huts, and they were inspected daily by the drill sergeant, who kept pointing out that the floor wasn't clean. Nash, who had been designated the Platoon Guide, a largely nominal position of leadership, complained to the drill sergeant about the fact that they only had one scraggly mop and one bucket. The drill sergeant led Nash out the back door and looked across an open area to where another line of Quonset huts housed the trainees in a different battalion.

"They've got mops and buckets," the drill sergeant remarked, pointing the cleaning supplies left outside the far building to dry. "I wonder where they got them." He then gave Nash a knowing look and left. Nash got the message. The next morning his platoon had plenty of mops and buckets, and after using them they hid them. Lesson learned.

By the next day, Quan had a full complement of field gear, including a pistol belt that was almost too big even at the smallest adjustment, two canteens, and a backpack, among other things. Some of it came from the Cu Chi hospital, which had a room full of field gear removed from wounded and dead soldiers, and some of it came from the barracks of remfs, men who worked right there on the base camp every day, and thus presumably didn't really need field gear. Harv and Tony acquired additional bladder-style canteens that way as well, since those held more water than the standard canteen. As Trey pointed out, they would be all by their lonesome out in the Michelin, and they needed to be as well-equipped as possible. Nash dismissed any qualms he had about such petty thievery. The morals of his Catholic upbringing had been severely tarnished by the incident with the priest.

The steady roar of the diesel engine, the gentle clatter of the track blocks on the muddy road, and the gentle swaying motion of the armored personnel carrier, almost put Nash to sleep. The only thing keeping him awake was the occasional dirt clod and mud splash thrown up by the APC in front of them

that splattered on the men sitting on top of the M-113 that was third in line. A mech platoon was transporting the sniper team into the Michelin early this morning, pretending they were on a normal RIF, or reconnaissance in force mission. Most of the members of this track's squad had shifted over to the other tracks in the platoon to make room for the snipers. The mech squad leader was a Spec Four named Reyes, but despite their apparently shared ethnic backgrounds, he had been cool to Nash. Nash wondered if it was because he was a sniper, and Reyes had a dislike for that occupation based on his experiences in combat, or maybe it was just because Nash was a stranger.

Nash had taken the seat on the right front of the track, right behind the exhaust pipe, not realizing until they were moving that he would be engulfed by diesel smoke. His seat was in fact a wooden ammo crate strapped down to the top of the vehicle, right beside the machine gun turret. The other tracks in the platoon had angular turrets made up of sheet steel welded together, but this one had a molded cup-shaped turret. Nash wondered what the difference was, but didn't ask. A black PFC sat inside the turret, his hands on the grips of the .50-cal machine gun, and his eyes constantly searching the surroundings. Reyes sat on the hatch cover behind the driver, wearing a CVC helmet with internal earphones and a mike that he occasionally spoke into.

Behind Reyes, on a metal ammo can, sat Jefferson, cradling his XM-21 rifle on his lap. Nash had his rifle in its protective bag lying on the top of the track between his seat and the machine gun cupola, and his hand near the butt of the .45 on his hip. Jefferson had a .38 snub-nose revolver in a shoulder holster that he had somehow acquired from an Air Force pilot. Nash wasn't yet sure what to make of Jefferson. The sergeant was not unfriendly, but had been guarded and mostly silent. He had been a little critical when they had gone to the range and Tony had not qualified well, and had insisted on inspecting everyone's pack and gear this morning before they mounted up, but Nash understood that such behavior was normal and expected for the NCO who was leading the team. And Jefferson was new to the rank, and probably unsure just how to act.

On the other boxes tied down to the track were the other three members of their team. PFC Harvey Albertson was directly behind Jefferson, his body turned outward and his M-79 held ready, as if he was expecting an ambush at any minute. Behind Nash was SP4 Tony Mazzola, who held his M-16

upright between his legs and acted as if he were going for a Sunday drive.

Nash and Trey had both been surprised, and not very pleasantly, by the inclusion of Nguyen Van Quan, the former Viet Cong “rallier”. American soldiers generally felt that if they had switched sides once, the logic went, what kept them from switching sides again? But Quan’s initial earnestness had been a mark in his favor. Besides, Captain Banning had insisted that Quan go along, since he theoretically knew the area and could help them find suitable firing positions. Quan spoke passable English and acted like he was glad to be with them, so Nash had given him the benefit of the doubt, but privately he and Trey had agreed to keep a close eye on him. Quan and the other members of the team wore boonie hats; helmets and flak vests had been left behind because they added weight, and the team needed all its strength to carry the weapons, radio, ammo, food, and water to last five days without resupply. Nash wondered if Quan, by wearing the US-style uniform, hoped to be mistaken for an American soldier by anyone they met, knowing how most people, including Vietnamese civilians and the enemy, despised the Chieu Hois.

Nash and the rest of the team had been flown from Cu Chi to Dau Tieng yesterday afternoon, and the mech platoon had picked them up this morning. They had departed the gate at the base camp not long after sunrise, and had been driving a circuitous route until they reached the edge of the Michelin. Here they left the road and spread out amongst the trees, driving line abreast down the seemingly endless lanes that comprised the plantation. Although the sun had been bright on the road to the rubber, the clouds had rolled in right after they had arrived. Nash had not been in a rubber plantation before, but he had seen photos; nonetheless, the reality was fascinating. The rubber trees were as straight and upright as telephone poles, but in many cases at least twice as tall. They were covered in a grey bark that Nash found somewhat similar to that of the aspen trees in the mountains around his home, and the rubber trees had virtually no branches until near the very top. Planted in rows about thirty feet apart, the lines of trees stretched out for miles to the north and east, like an art class exercise in perspective. Overhead the leaves of each tree meshed and blended with those around them, creating a solid canopy that was only occasionally pierced by sunlight. With today’s clouds, the plantation was relatively dark, in a perpetual twilight devoid of shadows.

The ground around and between the trees was mostly clear except for

fallen leaves, but occasionally there would be a clump of brush or high grass that obscured what was beyond, and sometimes they would see and detour around a tree that had fallen, sometimes canted as it was caught by other trees. In some ways, Nash thought, the rubber was like a giant park, a place for children to play and adults to take a stroll, but he knew that impression was deceptive. Protected by the overhead cover, the enemy controlled the plantation and used it as a perfect route to transport arms and supplies south from the Cambodian border to the areas around Saigon. All the Americans could do was run quick patrols in the daytime, and even those were risky, since they could not call in artillery or air support.

They had only been cruising through the rubber for about an hour when the tracks all slowed down. Responding to radio directions that Nash couldn't hear, the four APCs took up positions facing the four points of the compass and then shut down their engines.

"Twenty minute break," Reyes called out. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em." In a quieter voice he told the sniper team, "We'll be dropping you guys off here. You can take cover in those bushes over there until after we're gone." He nodded toward a clump of brush a few yards southeast of the tracks. Most of the mech guys began dismounting, stretching their legs and brushing off any mud that had accumulated, so Nash and the rest of the team did the same. He noticed that the men in the machine gun turrets stayed put, maintaining a watchful eye down the lanes of trees.

Reyes walked around to the back of the track and opened the personnel hatch, locking it back against the metal ramp. Harv Albertson ducked inside and handed out the sniper team's backpacks and other gear. Due to his size, Harv had been designated the RTO, which meant he had to carry the PRC-25 radio in addition to his other gear. Due to his smaller stature, Quan's backpack was mostly filled with the lighter LRRP rations. All the team members carried two of the bladder-style canteens full of water, along with a single quart canteen in its holster on their web belt, plus plenty of ammunition for their weapons. In addition they carried some socks and underwear, a poncho and poncho liner, weapons cleaning gear, and whatever personal items they wanted. It was quite a load, but Nash and Trey wanted to be sure they could survive on their own for five days. He and Trey had discussed it all day yesterday, picking and choosing what would be carried and by whom, and Nash felt like they were as prepared as they could be. As

he and the other pulled on their backs and adjusted their gear, the mech platoon's lieutenant came over.

"I don't envy you guys," the lieutenant said. His name was Carr, and seemed like a nice enough guy. "The rubber can be kind of spooky, especially at night."

Trey shrugged. "No big deal," he remarked with forced casualness. Nash, too, pretended a confidence he didn't really feel.

Carr's platoon sergeant, an E-7 named Samples, joined them, helping Tony Mazzola tighten one of his pack straps. "You sure you guys know what you're doing?" Samples asked.

"No," Nash admitted, "but we'll figure something out."

"I'm sure the general knows what he's doing," Mazzola said without a trace of sarcasm. Nash glanced at the thin man's face, and saw the look of a true believer. And that bothered him, more than a little.

Nash heard a click and snap, and looked up to see one of the men on top of the track had just lit a cigarette. The man examined the pack, found it empty, crumpled it in his fist, and threw it over the side. It looked like a white Viceroy package. He hated to see littering, but Nash knew that that one cigarette pack was totally insignificant in the greater scheme of things here in Viet Nam, where shell casings, equipment, and even human bodies were left lying around all over the country.

"Everyone good to go?" Trey asked, apparently anxious to get started. Nash and the others nodded, but Quan spoke up for the first time since they had left Dau Tieng.

"We need make sure no one watch us," he advised seriously, pointedly looking at the surrounding rubber trees.

Samples yelled out to the men on guard in the machine gun turrets: "Johnson, Sweet, Pratt, Merrill! Heads up! Eyes front! You see any movement?" They all responded negatively. "Don't mean nothin', of course," Samples told Trey. "Gooks are good at keeping out of sight, but if there were any out there, we probably would have heard from 'em by now."

Nash noticed a quick frown on Quan's face when the platoon sergeant had referred to the enemy as gooks. He wondered if that was just a natural reaction to a perceived racial slur, or something else. He'd have to keep an

eye on the Vietnamese man.

“What do you think?” Trey asked Samples, seeking advice from the experienced soldier. “We move out together, or wander over to the bushes one at a time, like we’re going out to take a piss?”

Samples scoffed. “Taking a piss with all that gear on? Nah, just go together. Either they see you or they don’t.”

“Good enough,” Trey said, nodding. “Okay, let’s move out.” Trey led off, with Nash and the others following in a line, Quan bringing up the rear. As they trudged toward the clump of bushes, Nash heard the APC engines roar to life as the platoon prepared to continue their RIF. *Leaving us behind*, he thought morbidly.

# THREE

Nash found a small open space among the bushes, dropped his pack, and unzipped his rifle bag. Around him the other members of the team explored the brush, searching out a comfortable place to lay up for the rest of the day.

In the middle of the thicket lay two downed rubber trees, one trunk crosswise to the other. Nash sat down on one of the logs and slid his XM-21 out of the bag, screwed on the suppressor, mounted the scope, and then folded and packed the bag into his pack.

“Find a good spot and settle in,” Trey said, more as a suggestion than an order. “Let’s all get some rest, because we’ll probably be up all night.”

“Do we need to post guards?” Nash asked. He knew the answer, but wanted Trey to give the commands. Trey was the ranking member of the team, and ostensibly the squad leader, but Nash had sensed an occasional reluctance on Trey’s part to be the man in charge.

“Of course,” Trey answered, perhaps a little testily. “Everybody pick a sector and keep watch. I’ll make up a roster so we can take turns sleeping.”

“I’ll take the south,” Nash volunteered, since he was already facing that way.

“Okay,” Trey agreed. “Albertson, you take east, Mazzola west, and I’ll take north.”

Quan spoke up, sounding genuinely cooperative. “What I do?”

Trey scowled. “You can rotate around, relieve anyone that wants to take a leak or a nap.”

Quan nodded, and Nash noticed he didn’t seem offended by Trey’s distrust. Shouldering his pack again, Nash looked around and found the broken stump of a rubber tree with only a few seedlings around the base. He backed up to the stump and sat down, using his pack as a backrest, and laid his rifle across his lap. The bushes in front of him gave him some concealment, but allowed him to look down the rows of trees for anyone who

might be approaching. He could hear the leaf-rustle and twig-cracking of the others as they, too, settled in. He immediately felt the dampness of the ground cover start to seep through the seat of his pants, but he was resigned to that. It was the rainy season, after all, and being wet was one of those things you just accepted as your fate, if you were in the infantry.

“Shit!” Albertson complained. “It’s starting to rain again.”

Nash heard it before he felt it. The leaves far above them began rattling as the drops hit them, a patter at first that soon developed into a soft roar. Nash looked up and realized the canopy directly overhead was thinner here, and mentally kicked himself for not figuring out sooner why this clump of foliage existed. The stump he was leaning against had once stood tall and in line with the others, but for some reason the tree had fallen. When that had originally happened, the resulting hole in the canopy had allowed sunlight to bake the floor of the plantation and encourage the growth of these bushes. Over the years, however, the branches of the surrounding trees had expanded to mostly fill in the gap, although enough sun still seeped through to maintain the foliage. But not today. They had seen brief glimpses of blue sky on the trip out from Dau Tieng, but the clouds had closed in just as they had reached the Michelin, and now they were dumping their moisture.

The canopy, in effect, broke the fall of the raindrops, turning them into drips that fell everywhere, splattering on Nash’s boonie hat and legs.

“Fuck me!” Mazzola whispered. “I’m sitting in a fucking puddle.”

“Put on your poncho,” Trey suggested from somewhere behind them. Nash had already thought of that, and was struggling out of his pack straps so he could get to his own poncho. He stood up to reposition his pack and pull the waterproof sheet over his head, and saw that Quan, standing a few feet behind him, already had his poncho on, as if he had known the rain was coming. To his left and right he saw Albertson and Mazzola putting on their ponchos as well, but Trey was out of sight beyond a tall shrub. With a final adjustment of his gear and pack, Nash sat back down, with his knees drawn up, and fluffed the poncho out around him like a tent. His ass would still get wet, but the rest of him would stay relatively dry.

“Tony, didn’t you say you’re from Seattle?” Albertson asked conversationally.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“You should be used to all this rain.”

“Back home, when it rained, I’d just go in the house,” Tony mused. “Maybe have a beer, watch some TV. I sure as shit didn’t go out in the back yard and sit on the wet grass.”

“Gee, why not?” Nash asked sarcastically. “Good training.”

“Yeah, fuck that. It rain like this where you’re from, Jaramillo?” Mazzola’s pronunciation of his name was still pretty poor.

“Call me Nash, it’s easier. No, it doesn’t rain much in New Mexico. We do have a rainy season in the summer, but it’s like only maybe ten inches all year.”

“Oh, that’s like me,” Tony chirped. “Ten inches.”

“In your dreams, Mazzola,” Trey chided from the other side of the bushes. “Now, if you were black, like me, maybe.”

This was the first time Nash had heard Jefferson make a joke of any kind, and it made him feel better about following the sergeant’s leadership. He had been afraid that Trey would be one of those soul brothers with a really bad attitude. He realized with a start he was being racist even thinking that, and vowed to improve his social consciousness. Or something. It was just that where Nash had grown up, black people were few and far between, so he had no real experience to draw upon, other than what he saw on TV and read in the newspapers. And the young blacks he had met since joining the Army had often had chips on their shoulders, but maybe, Nash realized, with good reason.

“So what’s New Mexico like?” Albertson asked. “Is it, like, all desert, with cactus?”

“No,” Nash told him, “it’s mostly mountains, with some high desert in the south part of the state. I live up in the mountains, up above Santa Fe, not far from Colorado.”

“So, uh, your folks are from Mexico?”

Nash sighed. “No, my folks are from Santa Fe. My ancestors have lived in New Mexico for over three hundred years. They came over from Spain. They’ve never lived in Old Mexico.”

“No shit?” Mazzola said with wonder. “Three hundred years? My

grandpa came over from Italy around the turn of the century, and I thought that was a long time ago.”

Albertson joined in, saying “My ancestors came over from Germany in the 1880’s. When did your folks come over, Sergeant Jefferson?”

Nash winced at the insensitivity of Albertson’s question. Harv was from upstate New York, and he, too, had had little contact with African Americans, but he still should have known enough to avoid asking such a stupid question. Trey, however, didn’t make a big issue of it.

“Well,” Jefferson drawled, “we don’t have a complete family history, but apparently my great great great grandparents were given a free cruise from Africa to America back before the Civil War.”

Albertson, realizing his error, apologized: “Hey, man, I’m sorry, that was a stupid question.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Trey told him. “You can’t help it if you’re ignorant.” That remark was stated in a clearly friendly, non-confrontational tone, which Nash appreciated.

“Thanks,” Harv replied sincerely.

Wanting to change the subject, Nash asked, “So how’d you get roped into being a sniper, Trey?”

“Ah, you know, it just seemed like a good idea at the time. Fun, travel, adventure.” He paused. “Actually, they asked me to volunteer. They said it was because I was good with a rifle, but I don’t know about that. But it did seem a like a change of pace, something different.”

“You were assigned to West Berlin first,” Mazzola said. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, I was there a year.”

“So you’re RA?” RA stood for Regular Army, which meant the soldier had enlisted voluntarily, and not been drafted. It also meant the soldier had a four-year obligation, rather than the two years draftees had to serve.

“RA all the way,” Trey said sarcastically. “Maybe not the smartest move I’ve ever made.”

“So how did you get from Berlin to Nam?” Albertson asked.

“Let’s just say that guys of my ethnic persuasion are not always

welcomed by the people of Germany, so I asked to be transferred.” Nash heard this casual remark and wondered what lay beneath it. He himself had experienced some discrimination in the Army, but since he looked pretty white, it had been tolerable. Jefferson’s experience had probably been more intense.

No one spoke for a few minutes, until Albertson said, “Damn! It’s after noon and it’s dark as shit.”

Harv was right. Nash peered through the leaves and could barely see a thousand yards before the rubber trees disappeared in a blanket of murky mist. It had now been raining long enough that the water was running off the canopy and streaming down like a silver curtain. If these conditions continued, their effectiveness as snipers was severely compromised. The whole point of being a sniper was to shoot at long range, far enough away that the enemy couldn’t respond immediately. The low visibility would hamper their target acquisition and aiming, and the rain could potentially affect the trajectory of their bullets. They might be reduced to operating as a four man ambush patrol with no back up. Nash didn’t yet consider Quan a true member of the team.

The afternoon wore on, with long periods of silent boredom interspersed with brief pointless conversations. Nash had just checked his watch for the hundredth time, disappointed to see it was just after three. The rain had finally stopped, but the clouds were still thick, and water continued to intermittently drip down from canopy of leaves above them. Like the others, Nash had taken off his pack and canteens to get comfortable, and was sitting on his folded poncho.

“Somebody’s coming!” Albertson suddenly whispered excitedly. He brought his M-79 up to his shoulder.

“Where?” Trey asked.

“Straight east. Looks like two or three guys.”

As quietly as he could, Nash stiffly rose to a crouch and duck-walked over to Albertson, popping off the lens covers of his scope as he moved. He knelt down and raised the rifle to his shoulder, peering through the scope down the long line of trees.

“Mazzola, stay where you are,” Trey commanded. “Quan, you watch to

the south.” Trey was making sure the perimeter stayed secure so that no one could sneak up on them from behind. Nash adjusted the scope reticle and simultaneously swept the rifle slowly from left to right until he located the figures in his crosshairs.

“Three gooks,” he reported tersely. “Black pajamas, straw hats, carrying something. Look like buckets.”

“Buckets?” Harv asked, apparently confused.

Nash watched for a few seconds. “Yeah, looks like their going from tree to tree, dumping the bowls.” Each of the rubber trees in the plantation had a shallow pottery bowl at waist height sitting in a wire loop, and above the bowl a deep cut in the bark spiraled up around the trunk. Nash guessed that the tree sap was supposed to ooze out of the cut and run down into the bowl, to be collected for making into rubber.

“Any weapons?” Trey asked.

“Looks like they got big knives. Yeah, one of them just used hers to re-cut the bark.”

“Hers? They’re women?” Albertson sounded like he didn’t believe it.

“Two of them,” Nash said, still sighting through the scope. “Other one appears to be an old man with a beard.”

“Isn’t this a free fire zone?” Albertson asked. “They’re not supposed to be out here working the rubber, are they?”

“Not supposed to,” Trey agreed, “but they do it.”

“People need money,” Quan explained.

“What if they get too close?” Mazzola queried anxiously. “Do we zap ‘em?”

“Let’s just hope that doesn’t happen,” Trey reassured him. “Nash, are they moving this way?”

Nash watched the distant figures as they worked their way down the line of trees. “Yeah, but real slow. Wait. They’ve stopped, and they’re discussing something. The old man is looking in all the buckets. Okay, they’re turning back now. Must have made their quota.” Nash felt the tension leave his arm and back muscles, but he kept the scope trained on the figures until they were out of sight. He was surprised by how glad he was he

didn't have to shoot. He again wondered how he would actually react the first time he had an enemy soldier in his crosshairs.

"They're gone," Nash announced as he stood up and went back to his previous location, where Quan was standing watch. Quan made way for him, but stayed close by.

"It is good you not shoot them," Quan told Nash quietly. Nash nodded.

"Quan, can you watch my sector?" Trey said, moving through the brush over to Nash.

"Yes, Sergeant," Quan replied, and the two passed by each other as they changed places.

Trey set the butt of his rifle on the ground and knelt down next to Nash. "You got your map handy?" he asked.

Nash stretched his right leg out so he could more easily get into the cargo pocket of his fatigue pants. He pulled out his map, wrapped in clear plastic, and opened it across his lap.

"I've been thinking," Trey said. He pointed to a spot on the map. "We're supposed to get to there by morning, but I'm not sure traveling at night is such a good idea." Nash looked at the map, estimating the distance to their first OP, or observation post, at about 10 clicks, or six miles. Their next position wasn't actually marked on the map, in case the map was captured by the enemy, but they had worked out a way to keep track of it, and all the other OP's. There were ten points marked on the map in pen, each with a letter next to it. The actual OP's were one grid square to the east and one and a half grid squares to the north of each reference point, and thus easily found without leaving any indication on the map where they were. All four of the American soldiers had a copy of the map, but if one of the maps were lost, it would not endanger the mission.

"Why not?" Nash asked. This plan had been worked out back in the base camp, with lots of input from Captain Banning and some officer from G-2.

"There're no landmarks out here. It's just mother-fucking rows of trees. We can't see the stars, even if there weren't any clouds. All we got is compasses, and to tell you the truth, I was never all that good with land

navigation. Besides, we're more likely to run into gooks at night than in the daytime. I think we ought to take off now, rather than wait. What do you think?"

Nash considered Trey's arguments, and mostly agreed with them. "It would be better to find the spot while we can see what we're doing," Nash said, nodding thoughtfully. "Think we could make it there before dark?"

"Ten clicks? I think so. It's what, three-thirty now? Gives us about three hours. I think we can do that."

"Okay," Nash said, "I'm game." While he did believe it was the right decision, Nash was glad that Trey was the one to propose it and be responsible for the result. He remembered the saying he had heard once: the man who can smile when everything is going to hell around him is the man who knows whom he can blame it on.

"Okay, guys," Trey announced, "saddle up. We're moving out to the first Oscar Papa."

"I thought we weren't going until after dark," Albertson said, not actually complaining.

"That's what you get for thinking," Mazzola chided him, shrugging on his backpack.

Nash noticed that Quan shouldered his own pack without commenting on the change in plans, but he didn't look upset or concerned. Nash again wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

# FOUR

All five men were standing now, but keeping a few feet apart and staying within the clump of bushes. Sergeant Jefferson had his lensatic compass out, placing it on top of his own map of the area. He looked up from the map and stared to the northeast, then looked back down at the compass. Then he lifted the compass to his cheek and peered through the sighting device, twisting his body back and forth a few inches as he tried to steady the needle. “Fuck me,” he muttered under his breath, but Nash heard it anyway.

“I’ve got a suggestion,” Nash offered.

“What?” Trey asked, apparently glad for any input.

“You know, crossing these rows at an angle puts us at risk of being seen from damn near any direction. What if we go north along a row for, like, four trees, and then east along a row for three or four trees, and then take another bearing. That way we’d be visible from only two directions at a time, instead of four.” The trees in the plantation had been planted in a strict grid pattern, with each tree the same distance from each of the neighboring trees.

“Like a castle moves in chess,” Trey remarked thoughtfully, nodding. “I can see that. What do the rest of you guys think?”

Nash was surprised that Jefferson was taking a vote on the issue, but then, he had only been a sergeant for a short time. Albertson and Mazzola voiced their approval, and Quan nodded.

Jefferson raised the compass to his cheek again briefly, and then pointed his index finger at the trees, counting them off. “Looks like we should go eight trees north and six and a half trees east to maintain our bearing. So, eight north, six east, then eight north, seven east, and alternate like that. Think that will work?”

“Should,” Nash told him. “I’ll take point.” He volunteered because it was his idea to move this way, and he wanted to see if it would work the way he envisioned it.

“Okay,” Jefferson said. “Quan, you’ll be next in line, then me, Harv, and Tony’ll bring up the rear. Keep five yards apart, don’t bunch up. And stay in line with the trees.” Nash moved out at a moderate pace, wanting to make time, but not wanting to rush into anything. He glanced back to see the others follow at suitable intervals. Nash got to the next tree in line and paused just long enough to look down the perpendicular lane to the east and west to ensure there was nobody in sight before he took off again for the next tree. He was well aware that this stair-step pattern would take longer than going directly along the desired azimuth, but he truly felt it was safer. He just hoped it wouldn’t take so much longer that they wouldn’t reach their objective before nightfall.

It was after six—1815 hours, Army time—when Jefferson called a halt. The gloom in the rubber was so thick Nash could just barely make out the next two trees in line. Trey brought his map up to Nash and together they peered down at it, trying to make sense of it in the fading light.

“I think we’re here,” Jefferson said, putting his finger on the map. “But there should be a road of some sort.” Nash looked around them, squinting his eyes to try and pierce the dusk.

“Is that a road over there?” he asked, pointing three trees away to the east.

“Harv,” Jefferson said over his shoulder, “go check that out. See if that’s a road over there.”

“Okay,” Albertson answered, and trotted on ahead, almost disappearing in the dimness. He came back quickly, nodding his head. “Yep, looks like a road. Doesn’t look like anyone’s been on it for a while, though.”

“Good,” Jefferson said with relief. “So let’s find a hide of some sort. Spread out.”

While the others searched in other directions, Nash kept going east, to check out the road himself. He found that it wasn’t so much a road as a double-track path, covered with fallen leaves. He guessed it was rarely used, even when the planation was in full operation, and probably just for trucks making a pick-up of collected rubber sap. The road shown on the map appeared to be more substantial, but the map had been created back before

the war, when things might have been different. Still, it was a road, and if their chess moves had brought them to where they thought they were, then it all matched up. In the Michelin, however, with its endless rows of rubber trees and no real landmarks, all roads and trees looked just alike.

“How about this?” Mazzola called out softly. Nash followed the sound of Tony’s voice, not seeing him until he got fairly close. Mazzola had headed up the road to the north, and he was now standing next to a pile of wood and a big rusty storage tank of some sort. Jefferson, Quan, and Albertson came up behind Nash.

“Looks like an old shed,” Mazzola told them. Nash carefully explored the area, and agreed with Tony. There was a concrete slab, broken in several places, and rotting lumber around it in a roughly square pile. The rusting remains of a cylindrical storage tank were bolted to a smaller slab at the north end, its curved top crusty with rust. The horizontal tank had been painted yellow at one time, but most of the paint had flaked off. The circular ends were welded and riveted, with the end facing the road having a spigot that was now corroded and black. It was only about ten yards from the road, a couple trees south of where they had originally stopped.

“It’ll do for now,” Jefferson announced. “Find a good spot and get comfortable. Nash, why don’t you go ahead and mount your starlight, and I’ll get mine out for the others to use when they’re on guard.” Nash grounded his pack and reached inside for his starlight scope. The light-amplifying telescope was bulky and heavy, and the metal case it was normally stored in made it even worse, so two days ago he and Trey had requisitioned a wool blanket and a dark green waterproof bag from Supply and taken them to the Vietnamese seamstress who worked at the PX. She quickly cut up the blanket and bag and turned them into two tubular padded water resistant carrying cases for the starlights. Nash untied the top of his starlight bag and withdrew the fat black scope; quickly detaching his ART scope, he replaced it with the starlight, and was now ready for night sniping, should it be necessary.

Trey, Harv, and Tony sat down inside the square of old lumber on the concrete slab, moving a few old boards out of their way. Nash took a seat under the curve of the storage tank, between it and the remains of the shed. Quan squatted just outside the shed, on the far side from the road. They had a quick cold meal, and Jefferson made up a guard roster, putting himself on

guard first. He told the rest of them to try and get some sleep. Nash used his pack as a pillow, covered his body and his rifle with his poncho, and then dozed off. He had learned early in the Army to sleep whenever you can, because you never knew when you would get the next opportunity.

The muffled cough brought Nash instantly awake. He opened his eyes to the gray light of pre-dawn, the rusty barrel curve of the storage tank inches from his face. Turning his head, he saw Tony Mazzola standing up and stretching, and realized he couldn't go back to sleep now. It had been a rough night. Lying on the hard concrete slab, his mind racing, it had taken what seemed like hours to fall asleep, only to be awakened for his guard shift minutes later. Oddly, it had rained while he was asleep, and he hadn't even noticed. After waking Quan to take the next shift two hours later, he had wrapped himself in his poncho and curled up under the tank, certain he wouldn't be able to doze off again, but obviously he had. His hip ached, his eyes were gummy, and his mouth tasted like a used sweat sock. Moving slowly, he uncurled, rolled over, and used the butt of his rifle to help him stand up. Mazzola heard him and looked over, nodding a morning greeting. The others were still asleep.

Slinging the rifle over his shoulder, Nash walked to a nearby rubber tree and unbuttoned his pants to take a leak. As the pressure in his bladder blissfully eased, he looked around, able to see the area better now that the morning light was increasing. It looked a lot like the rest of the planation—straight lines of trees running north and south, east and west, with broad areas of low grass and dead leaves in between, broken only by occasional seedlings or bushes. The road, such as it was, led away north and south, a barely discernable track between the open lanes of trees. Not, he thought, a good location for a sniper.

Buttoning his pants as he walked, Nash returned to their OP and found Quan and Trey sitting up, rubbing their eyes, and Harv stumbling off in the opposite direction while he unbuttoned his own pants. Mazzola was digging into his pack, probably looking for something to eat.

“Wakey, wakey,” Nash joked, “time to catch a big fish.”

Trey scowled at him.

Tony had a plastic bag in his hands. “I’m going to make some. . .” he

paused to squint at the label on the bag, “chicken noodle soup. Anybody want to share?”

“Cold?” Nash asked skeptically.

“We could build a fire,” Tony suggested hopefully.

“No fires,” Trey scolded. He stood up and stretched his arms, looking around at the plantation in the growing light. Quan reached in his own pack and pulled out a paper-wrapped ball, which he unwrapped to reveal a glob of cooked rice that he began to eat like an apple. Tony sliced open the plastic bag with his pocket knife and began dribbling water from his canteen into the bag a little at a time, pausing every few seconds to judge the results. Nash was hungry, but not enough for cold chicken soup, so he undid a strap on his pack and found a bar of the Hershey’s hard dark chocolate that came in the SP packs. He unwrapped it and began gnawing on the end, finally breaking off a chunk that he could let slowly dissolve in his mouth. As he did this, he replaced the starlight on his rifle with his ART scope and packed the starlight away. Albertson returned and took Mazzola up on his offer of the soup. While Tony finished preparing the meal, Albertson called in a situation report on the radio. It took him a couple minutes to make contact, but finally he got through. By the time he was done, Tony had already eaten as much as he wanted, and handed the bag of gelatinous goop to Harv, who dug into it with his white plastic spoon from a C-ration case.

“This shit sucks,” Harv said judiciously, taking another scoop from the bag.

“Sorry,” Trey remarked blandly. “I had planned on eggs benedict, but Mr. Arnold wasn’t available.”

Nash nearly spat out some chocolate as he laughed, then laughed harder when he saw the looks of puzzlement on the faces of Tony and Harv, who obviously didn’t get the joke. Quan just kept eating his rice and looking around, oblivious to the conversation of the Americans.

“This not good place,” Quan stated suddenly. “Too close to road.”

Nash was a little surprised and annoyed that the Vietnamese had reached the same conclusion as he had, but had pointed it out before Nash could. “That’s what I was thinking,” he said, trying to save face.

Jefferson nodded, turning to look at the road. “Nobody came through

here last night,” he noted, scratching his cheek. “Maybe we should move on to our next OP.”

“Weren’t we supposed to be here two nights?” Nash asked, already knowing the answer. Jefferson was in charge, and he had more experience than Nash, but Nash had gotten the feeling that Trey sometimes needed to be prodded to make the right decisions.

“True that,” Trey said. “This road ought to be a, what do they call it, a ‘target-rich environment’?”

“And if any gooks do come through here,” Nash said, “they’d likely stop here for a minute, or use this as a rendezvous point.”

“Yeah,” Trey said, turning slowly to look all around them, “but I just don’t see any other good cover and concealment around here.”

“We could scout around, maybe find something,” Nash said.

“I’ve got my entrenching tool,” Albertson offered. “We could dig in.” Harv was the only person who had brought the Army-issue folding shovel strapped to his pack; the others had not wanted the extra weight. Albertson was big and strong enough to not be bothered by it.

“Well, let’s see what we can find, first,” Trey said. “As soon as everyone is finished with breakfast, let’s load up and straighten this area so it doesn’t look like we spent the night here. Then we’ll recon the area for a better site.”

“Sergeant Jefferson,” Quan called, waving one arm. He was about three hundred yards from the old shack, on the opposite side of the road, and two rows of trees to the north. Nash and the others had scattered and were wandering in widening circles looking for a good spot, while simultaneously watching in the distance for any movement that might indicate someone approaching. Nash kept looking as Jefferson trotted over to where Quan was standing. Through the trees Nash could see that there seemed to be some low bushes there, but they didn’t appear high or thick enough to provide suitable concealment. Nash found a slight depression in the ground between two trees, and knelt down to gauge if it was deep enough to work as a field-expedient foxhole. It wasn’t.

“Guys! Over here.” Trey and Quan were beckoning them with their

hands, so Nash stood up and jogged across the road toward the distant figures. He arrived just after Mazzola and Albertson, and saw what had attracted Quan. The low bushes were around the rim of a perfectly round hole in the ground, about three feet deep and twenty feet across.

“Looks like a bomb crater,” Mazzola remarked.

“An old one,” Trey agreed. The inside of the bowl-shaped depression was covered with grass and dead leaves, and a small puddle of rainwater had gathered at the center.

Nash turned and looked back at the storage tank. He could just see part of it through the trees, and part of the tumbled-down shack; the angle through the intervening rows of trees gave them a couple sight lines, but not full coverage. But it was better than nothing.

“I thought they weren’t supposed to bomb in the Michelin,” Harv said.

“This looks pretty old,” Nash said, turning back to the group. “Might have been the French, or even the Japanese.”

“Whatever,” Jefferson said, stepping over the bushes and down into the crater. “It’ll certainly work for us. Good catch, Quan.”

Nash saw Quan smile with pride. He nodded appreciatively toward the little guy as well.

The men dropped their packs and took up positions around the perimeter of the depression, avoiding the puddle in the middle. Nash found a place that afforded him the best view of the storage tank, sighting between two bushes that provided him some concealment. Lying on his stomach, his head just above the rim, he pushed his rifle through the grass and leaves, lowered the bipod until the legs locked into place, and adjusted his scope until it was focused on the distant rusting hulk. Jefferson took a position to his right, pointing his rifle toward the northwest to cover the road as it approached the shed, under the assumption that any gooks would be traveling north to south.

Albertson lay down to Nash’s left, covering the southern approaches, and Mazzola was on the other side of Jefferson, covering the northeast quadrant. Quan was on the opposite side of the crater, watching their backs. Nash liked this position much more than last night’s—they had good cover and concealment, a suitable distance from their potential targets, and a comfortable place to lie in wait.

Nash took a few minutes to improve his firing position, moving a stick under the leaves that was poking him in the stomach, pulling off a small branch from the bush in front of him to give himself a better line of sight, positioning his pack near his feet so that he could slip it on quickly, and getting out his poncho liner. The last item, standard issue to all infantrymen in Viet Nam, was a thin quilted nylon square designed to be worn under a poncho for extra warmth. Printed with a green and brown camouflage pattern, it was mostly used as a light blanket or ground cover, but Nash pulled it over his prone body to make himself even less visible. Nash wasn't sure if the others were copying his actions, or would have done the same thing anyway, but soon they were all quietly lying under their liners, trying to visually melt into the background. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

At sunrise the sky was clear, and rays of bright light flickered through the trees, briefly illuminating tree trunks and patches of ground before moving on. Gnats whined around Nash's ears, and birds called out from somewhere above them. He began to sweat under the poncho liner, but he tried to ignore the discomfort. The daylight had just managed to brighten the gloom of the plantation when the clouds again covered the sun, plunging the vast grove of trees into semi-darkness again.

"Hope it don't rain again," Albertson remarked, but sounded pessimistic.

"It will," Jefferson assured him. "It always does."

"Into every life a little rain must fall," Nash added in a chipper Pollyanna voice.

"It's good for the rubber trees," Mazzola stated authoritatively.

"Who fuckin' cares?" Albertson retorted.

"Hold it down," Jefferson warned them, but with no real concern or conviction. The group fell silent for a while. Nash listened to the sounds of the rubber, and heard nothing unusual. Somewhere far above the trees a jet flew by. Nash wondered if it was one of the Freedom Birds, the chartered airliners taking soldiers back to the States. They took off from Tan Son Nhut airport near Saigon, but sometimes circled way inland before heading east over the ocean.

"Nash," Albertson spoke up quietly, "you got any Indians where you live?"

“Well, yeah,” Nash replied, wondering what brought that question to mind.

“Apaches, and like that?”

“There’s a lot of Apaches in the middle of the state. Up north, where I’m from, it’s mostly pueblo Indians.”

“You mean they live in those houses in the cliffs?”

“Cliff dwellings, you mean? Not anymore. There are a few that still live in the pueblos on the reservations, but most live in regular houses. Why?”

Albertson hesitated, and then asked tentatively, “You got any Indian blood in you?”

“My grandmother is Tesuque.”

“Tasookee? What’s that?”

“It’s one of the pueblo nations. They don’t like to be called tribes.”

“So, if you’re part Indian, does this sniping stuff kind of come natural to you?”

Nash didn’t know whether to laugh or get angry. He sighed. “I don’t think so, no. I did a lot of hunting in the mountains growing up, so that probably helped. The pueblo peoples weren’t great warriors or anything, like you’re talking about. That’s the Apaches, who were the enemies of the pueblos.”

“Huh,” Albertson grunted. He sounded a little disappointed.

“I’m pretty good with a spear,” Jefferson commented out of nowhere. “You know, because of my ancestors.” Nash chuckled, and he could see Albertson cringe a little. “Mazzola,” Trey continued, “you can handle a short sword, can’t you. Like Spartacus?”

“What?” Mazzola asked, apparently confused.

“You’re Italian, right? Like the Romans?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“All right,” Albertson interrupted, “I get it. I’ll shut up now.”

They were all quiet again, but five minutes later Jefferson hissed at

them. “Someone’s coming!” he whispered.

# FIVE

Nash tried to melt into the ground, keeping his head as low as possible while still able to see across the floor of the plantation. Like Nash, the others went instantly still and quiet. Off somewhere to his right Nash detected the faint sounds of footsteps and occasional voices in the distinctive sing-song tone of Vietnamese. Moving slowly, he made sure the magazine was seated fully in his rifle, the safety was off, and his eye was the proper distance from the end of the scope. He knew he already had a round in the chamber, so he could now fire at any time. A mixture of dread and excitement began to swell in his chest, as he would soon be facing his first actual contact as a sniper. This was what he had trained for, and now it could become a reality.

Looking around the scope, peering through the leaves, he tried to spot the approaching enemy, wondering how many there were, and how they were armed. For a while all he could see were rubber trees and the old storage tank. From this low perspective, he couldn't even see the road.

"Five!" Trey hissed urgently. "Three AKs, an SKS, and a pistol."

Nash raised his head a little farther, and finally caught a glimpse of the group as they passed between the trees. As Trey had noted, there were five men. Two had the black pajamas and conical straw hats of the Viet Cong, but the other three had the dark green uniforms and pith helmets of the North Vietnamese Army. The two VC were armed with an AK-47 assault rifle and an SKS carbine; two of the NVA carried AKs, and the third had a holstered pistol. Judging by the neatness of his uniform and the pistol on his belt, Nash figured that one was an officer. The two lower-ranking NVA soldiers carried big black bulging backpacks, and Nash wondered why the VC were not similarly encumbered. Usually the NVA lorded it over the VC and made them do the heavy lifting.

The group was heading south along the road, but Nash wouldn't have a clear shot until they reached the old shack. "How do you want to do it?" he whispered to Jefferson.

“I’ll take the guy with the pistol, and the NVA to his right. You see if you can get the guy to his left and the VC with the AK. We’ll save the SKS till last.”

“Roger.” It was a good plan, as long as it worked out the way they expected. But Nash knew that things never went as planned. He put his eye to the scope and tried to track them as they sauntered down the road like it was a walk in the park. Rubber trees kept intervening in his sight line, until finally they neared the storage tank. He adjusted the focus on his scope until the figure of the NVA soldier on the officer’s left was just right, and then moved his hand down and eased the tip of his index finger onto the trigger. He took a deep breath and let half of it out, then held it as he checked his stock weld, forward grip, and eye relief. He was ready. And then the plan was disrupted.

At a sharp command from the officer, the other soldiers broke formation. The two NVA soldiers with the backpacks went around to the far side of the storage tank, followed by the officer, while the two VC went over to the front of the tumbled-down shack and squatted down to smoke cigarettes. With the storage tank in the way, Nash couldn’t get a clear shot at either of the soldiers, and swinging his aim to the VC after the first shot would take longer than anticipated.

“Shit!” Trey cursed under his breath. “Hold fire. We’ll wait until they’re back on the road.”

“Pssst!” Quan was pointing off to the northeast. “More soldier.”

Nash didn’t want to lose his optimal firing position, so he didn’t look back, but Mazzola confirmed the sighting.

“Bunch of gooks,” he whispered. “At least platoon strength. All NVA. About 300 meters out, moving south.”

Nash looked up from the scope so he could see all the men at the storage tank and shed, and as he observed them, he caught a flicker of movement off in the distance. He lifted the scope to his eye and zoomed in through the rows of trees.

“More gooks to the west,” he announced quietly. “Maybe twenty, NVA, moving south.”

“Flank guards,” Jefferson surmised. “I think we’re outnumbered. Lay

low.”

Nash thought Trey had simply stated the obvious, but decided it was probably the right thing to do. One thing he had noticed since he joined the Army was that if there was any way to misinterpret an order, someone would find it. He didn’t really know Albertson and Mazzola, and while he didn’t think they would do anything stupid, you could never tell for sure.

Nash forced his body to relax and lowered his head as much as he could while maintaining some view of his surroundings. He wondered if his boots were sticking out from under the poncho liner, but realized he couldn’t do anything about it now even if they were. In this shallow depression, the team should be invisible to the enemy soldiers, both the group on the road and the line of soldiers off to the east. While he couldn’t see the ones behind him, he could hear their footsteps on the dried dead leaves and their muttered conversations, and they were continuing to move south without stopping. The patrol in the west, too, appeared to be continuing without a halt. Nash pondered why the group on the road, which appeared to be the subject of the flank guards, would stop, but not signal the others to do so.

There was a metallic clang from the area of the shed and tank, and then the five men regrouped on the road, had a short discussion, and resumed traveling south. The stop at the tank had lasted only a couple minutes. More telling, however, was the fact that the two NVA soldiers with the AKs were no longer carrying back packs.

With the two flanking groups of NVA still paralleling the road, it would be suicide for Nash and Trey to try and shoot anyone, so they just lay there and mourned the lost opportunity. Actually, Nash was secretly glad that he hadn’t been able to shoot. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about being a sniper. In theory, it was the same as hunting deer or elk—you hid and waited for one to show up, and then shot it. But the targets now were humans.

As the enemy soldiers disappeared from sight, the tension slowly ebbed from the members of the sniper team. “Can’t see ‘em anymore,” Albertson reported.

“Keep watching,” Jefferson commanded. “They could come back, or there could be more coming.”

“What’d they do with the backpacks?” Nash asked rhetorically.

“What do you mean?” Mazzola said. Nash realized that Tony had been facing northeast, and couldn’t have seen what happened.

“They had backpacks when they arrived,” Nash explained, “but not when they left.”

“Yeah,” Jefferson said. Nash wondered if Trey had noticed it at the time. “They must have left them there at the old shack. But why?”

“Leaving them there for someone else to pick up?” Albertson suggested.

“I can’t see them,” Nash told them, looking through his scope.

“Want me to go check it out?” Tony volunteered.

“Not yet,” Trey said. “If someone is coming to pick them up, we need to be ready for them. Maybe get another chance to do some shooting.”

Nash agreed mentally. Whatever was in those backpacks appeared to be important. Otherwise, why have an officer in charge, and two platoons to guard the flanks. But, as he thought about, why leave them there and move everyone on? Granted, the communists pretty much controlled the entire plantation, and no one was likely to steal from them, but it still seemed odd.

“You think those backpacks are what the intel guys were talking about?” Nash asked.

“Maybe,” Trey answered. “Who knows? They weren’t very specific.”

“If they’re that important,” Harv remarked, “then why just leave them behind like that?”

“Good point,” Nash acknowledged.

“Quan,” Jefferson said, “what do you think? Why did they leave the backpacks?”

“*Khong biet*,” Quan replied, “I don’t know. Very strange.”

“If no one shows up by noon,” Trey decided for them, “we’ll check it out just before we make our next sitrep.”

Nash glanced at his watch. It was not yet nine o’clock. Plenty of time to hurry up and wait.

Nash caught himself dozing off, and shook his head violently to clear it.

The clouds had dispersed again, and sunbeams shone through the plantation like spotlights, narrow rays of bright light surrounded by the deep shade. The heat had grown steadily as the day progressed, and under the poncho liner it felt like a sauna, or what Nash thought a sauna might feel like, since he had never been in one. Or like a Navajo sweat lodge, of which Nash had also only heard, but not actually experienced. Finally deciding the potential danger was less important than the discomfort, he rolled over on his side and pulled the liner off, leaving it lying beside him. The relative coolness as his sweat began to dry was like heaven to him.

“They’re coming back,” Albertson whispered, and Nash immediately resumed a good prone firing position.

“How many?” Nash asked, trying to see down the road to the south. The nearby brush and more distant trees blocked his view.

“Uh, just two VC. Looks like the same two as this morning, maybe. Don’t see anyone else yet.”

“Just an AK and a SKS?” Trey asked.

“Affirmative.”

“Where’s the rest of them?” Trey asked speculatively, not expecting an answer.

Nash thought about pulling the poncho liner back over himself, but decided the movement would be more noticeable than his uncovered legs. Meanwhile he waited to see what the two VC would do, and whether there was anyone else following them. Soon enough the two men came into view, strolling down the road like they didn’t have anything better to do, chatting and smiling.

“I’ll take the one with the AK,” Trey whispered. “Don’t shoot until I give the word.”

Nash nodded and whispered, “Roger.” He captured the soldier with the SKS in his sight and made a minor adjustment to the focus as he tracked the slow-moving man. The two were nearly at the shed, and Nash was expecting to hear Trey give the order at any second. Once again he checked his stock weld, grip, trigger position, safety, and breathing, trying to lower his heartbeat, but feeling the excitement and tension rising.

“We’ll both shoot on three,” Trey said. Nash was glad Jefferson had

decided on that coordination. If they fired independently, the sound of one man's shot could cause the other to jerk or pull if he were firing a half-second later. It was like talking loudly when a fellow golfer was teeing off or putting, or so Nash had been told. He'd never played golf, and doubted he ever would, but he understood the simile.

The two black-clad VC reached the shed and stopped, right where Nash and Trey had perfect sight alignment, and Nash began increasing the pressure on the trigger in very gradual increments, waiting for the word from Trey. But before that could happen, the one with the AK strode over behind the storage tank, out of sight except for his legs. At first Nash worried that the man had somehow detected their presence and was taking cover, but then he heard the happy chattering from the man, and saw the AK being leaned up against the side of the tank. The other man propped his SKS against the broken down wall of the shed and joined the first one at the far end of the tank.

"Shit!" Trey cursed. "We had 'em."

Nash kept watching the storage tank, and caught glimpses of the two men as they moved around at the opposite end of the tank, talking and joking. Nash heard metallic clangs and the squeal of a rusty hinge.

"Quan," Trey whispered, "what are they saying?"

Quan listened a moment. "I can not hear good," he finally said. "I think one say, it still there."

"What's still there?" Mazzola asked.

"I don't know."

"Probably mean the backpacks," Nash muttered, his eye still to the scope.

"Maybe they were sent back to guard it," Albertson offered.

"Some guards," Trey whispered contemptuously. "Left their weapons lying around."

"Okay with me," Nash said. "Wait, here they come." The two men came out from behind the tank, raising their shirt tails to stuff something into the waistbands of their pants. They picked up their weapons and came out to the road, looking up and down it in what Nash interpreted as a furtive

manner.

“Let’s do it,” Jefferson ordered. “One, two, three.” It happened so fast Nash didn’t have time to think about it. He placed the crosshairs on the man with the SKS, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger on Trey’s command. The two shots weren’t exactly simultaneous, but close enough for Army work. The bullets left the rifles with a sharp clap, the suppressors reducing the report to something more like a .22 long, barely louder than the mechanical snick-snack of the bolt action as it came back to extract the empty shell and then shot forward to pull a fresh round from the magazine into the breech. Nash watched his target jerk, drop the carbine, and collapse in a heap. He kept his scope aimed at the man, looking for any movement that might indicate he was still alive, but the man’s body, lying in an awkward pose with one knee up, was perfectly still.

“Mine’s down,” Nash reported.

“Mine, too,” Trey responded shakily. “Harv, Tony, Quan, anyone coming?”

“Negative,” Albertson answered firmly.

“Don’t see anything,” Mazzola told them. His voice was quavering a little.

“Nothing,” Quan announced without emotion.

“We’ll wait a minute, before we go check them out.” Jefferson now sounded mostly normal, but Nash thought he could still hear a little tremor in the sergeant’s voice. Mine’s probably squeaky, too, Nash thought. His body felt both excited and drained at the same time. He had just shot and killed a man, the first time in his life, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He was proud that his shot was accurate, and he hadn’t hesitated, but knew he should feel remorse about causing the death of another human. But he didn’t. His target had been an armed enemy soldier, one who would certainly have shot Nash if he had had the opportunity. Nash had felt more compassion when killing a deer or elk, for those animals had no real defense, and bore no ill will toward humans. This was more like the time he had killed a bear that was charging him, clearly bent on ripping Nash limb from limb. It had been self-preservation then, and so it was now.

Nash concentrated on calming himself, making his body relax and

letting the adrenaline subside. He was glad, however, when Trey finally allowed them to stand up.

“Let’s go see what we’ve got,” Jefferson said, jumping up. Nash brought his knees up under him and popped up, surprised by how light his body felt. “Leave the packs here for now,” Trey instructed. “Harv, you keep watch to the south, Tony, you watch to the north. Approach with caution.”

Spreading out, the five men walked to the road with their weapons at the ready, heads swiveling to left and right. Nash stood over the man he had shot, who was staring with open eyes at the tops of the trees. Nash nudged him with his boot, and got no reaction. A puddle of blood seeped out from underneath the man. Nash bent over and picked up the man’s carbine, looked around, and then leaned it against a nearby tree. Walking over to where the other Viet Cong lay, he noticed Trey just staring down at the body without moving. The man still clutched his AK to his chest, but when he got close enough Nash could see the top of the man’s head was shattered. He wasn’t going to need the AK any more.

“Two up, two down,” Nash said, trying to lighten the mood a little. Trey just shook his head slowly.

“A head shot,” Nash said admiringly. “That’s great shooting.”

“Not really,” Jefferson answered, his tone somber and sorrowful. “I was shooting center mass. It went high for some reason. Maybe my scope’s not really zeroed, or I didn’t adjust it properly, or maybe I just jerked the trigger.”

“Well, it got the job done,” Nash assured him. He was surprised to see that Jefferson seemed to be pretty emotional about the kill. He was also surprised that he himself was relatively calm about it. So was the problem with Jefferson, or with himself? This was something he would have to think about—later.

Quan came up between them and squatted down by the body. He lifted up the man’s shirt and pulled out a stack of narrow pieces of paper that had been stuffed there. When he stood up again, Quan thumbed the stack, showing it to Nash and Trey. It was American hundred dollar bills, a stack over an inch thick. Several thousand dollars, at least.

“Motherfuck!” Trey breathed. “Where’d he get that kind of money?” Quan handed Trey the stack, held together by the shredded remains of some

plastic wrap, and went over to the other dead man. Searching that man, Quan pulled out another stack of money, this one tinged red with blood. He brought it back to where Nash and Trey stood, and showed that this stack was made up of South Vietnamese dong bills, which the American soldiers always referred to as piasters. The plastic had been removed, apparently, and the stack was held together with a piece of string. Quan tried to hand the stack to Jefferson, but he shook his head. "Not with all that blood on it," he said. "Throw it away." Quan shrugged his shoulders, and then tossed it into the broken down remains of the shed.

"They must have gotten it when they were messing around behind the storage tank," Nash said.

Jefferson nodded, and together they walked around the tank to the far end, Quan following at a respectful distance. That end of the tank looked just like the end closest to the road—a domed metal disk covered with rust and flaking paint. At the top was a metal ring that appeared to be a lifting point for when the tank had been moved there. Then Nash noticed a thin film of grease on the ring. Kneeling down, Nash felt around the lower edge of the disk, and found a metal protuberance that moved. He jiggled and pulled at it, and suddenly it popped and the disk swung out an inch. Pulling on the edge, he lifted the disk up, revealing a hidden compartment that was filled with two backpacks.

While Nash held the disk almost horizontal, Trey pulled the two backpacks out and dumped them on the ground. They were black nylon, more like civilian packs for hikers than military, and really large. With a final look inside to make sure it was now empty, Nash let the lid down slowly and pushed it shut until he heard the catch click. Trey had already propped his rifle against the side of the tank and began pulling at the straps that held one of the packs closed.

"What is it?" Mazzola called from the road, watching them through the trees.

"Eyes front, Mazzola," Trey answered angrily. "Make sure no one is coming."

Not willing to let go of his rifle, Nash bent over and tried to unstrap the other pack with one hand. Quan came over to help him. Trey had finally worked the flap free on his pack, opening it to reveal more stacks of cash,

each bundle carefully wrapped in clear plastic.

“Holy shit!” Trey exclaimed, and fell back to sit on the ground, landing hard. Nash and Quan got their pack open, and it, too, was filled with money. Nash reached in and pulled out a stack; it was more American one hundred dollar bills, at least a hundred of them, wrapped in clear plastic. Quan pulled out a stack of Vietnamese money, also high denomination. Trey scrambled forward on his knees and began lifting out stacks from the other pack, laying them on the ground in neat rows.

“Jesus H. Christ!” Jefferson laughed. “We are rich! Until we turn it in, anyway.”

Nash was glad Trey had added that caveat. While it was tempting to keep the money, it would be on their consciences forever, and probably get them arrested by the MPs. For one thing, it was illegal for American soldiers to possess American greenbacks in Viet Nam. They were paid in MPC—Military Payment Certificates—which could be spent at the PX, or exchanged for Vietnamese money. Most soldiers sent a good portion of their pay home by way of allotments, since there was little to buy at the PX anyway. And the local Vietnamese vendors gladly accepted MPCs, despite the official prohibition of anyone other than GIs using the play money. Official US currency was forbidden, on the grounds it could be used by the enemy or corrupt South Vietnamese officials, so if any of the sniper team members tried to keep the money and were caught, they could go to prison.

“Let’s pack this back up and go back to our hide,” Nash suggested, worried by Trey’s fascination with money.

“You’re right,” Jefferson conceded. “We can’t stay here.” He repacked the bills and hooked up the straps. “We need to get rid of the bodies, too. When the gooks come back, if they find the money gone and those two guys gone as well, they’ll figure they stole it. Otherwise, they’ll start looking for us.”

“Good point,” Nash said. He looked around, seeing nothing but flat ground and rubber trees. “But where?”

“Bury them. Harv’s got a shovel.”

“That’d take a while. How about we drag them to our hide and cover them with leaves. We won’t be using the hide anymore anyway.”

“Yeah,” Trey said, standing up and retrieving his rifle. “We need to vacate this area pretty damn quick. Why don’t you and Quan grab the backpacks.” Jefferson walked out to the road, while Quan and Nash gathered up the backpacks and slung them over their shoulders.

“Harv! Tony!” Jefferson called out, signaling for them to come to him. “Haul these two bodies back to where we left our packs. I’ll get their weapons.”

Nash and Quan hustled back to the hide with the backpacks, dumping them next to their own packs, and then went to help Tony and Harv. Each man grabbed an ankle of the dead VC and dragged them across the ground toward the hide. Jefferson carried the AK and SKS back to the hide and dumped them in the puddle that covered the center of the depression, then went back to the shed area and used a dead branch to spread the leaves around and cover up the blood. He then followed the other men, using the branch to sweep the leaves around and disguise the marks left by the bodies.

“I saw this in a cowboy movie once,” he explained to the others.

After a brief discussion, the sniper team took their packs out of the depression and carried the bodies into it, laying them side by side in the puddle. Gathering up all the dead leaves they could, they covered the bodies and brushed away as much of the evidence of their presence as they could. Nash even recovered the two empty shell casings, since the glittering brass would certainly draw attention. It wasn’t an ideal disposal, for the bodies would soon start to decompose and create a stench detectable even from the distant road, but it gave the team at least a day to move away from the scene. Once that was done, the men shouldered their own packs, and discussed how to carry the enemy packs loaded with money. Both bags were pretty heavy and bulky. Albertson volunteered to carry one of them in his arms, and Quan, since he didn’t have a weapon, was asked to carry the other. Jefferson promised that once they were in a better position, they would work out a more equitable solution. And with that they took off, heading east toward the OP listed as next on their map.

# SIX

Breathing hard, Nash dropped the bag of money on the ground and then sat on it. An hour earlier he had slung his rifle over his shoulder and taken the bag from Quan, who was obviously struggling with the surprisingly heavy pack full of cash. Who knew paper money weighed so much? In a hurry to distance themselves from the scene of the shooting, the team had quick-marched in an extended line through the plantation without stopping, taking calculated risks that they wouldn't be seen. By mid-afternoon they had reached an area where the rubber trees were smaller and somewhat stunted, which would have allowed more sunlight to reach the plantation floor, had it not clouded up and started raining again. Sunlight had been reaching this area for months, or years, however, and there were now large areas overgrown with tall grass and bushes. It was into one of these clumps of brush that the team had insinuated themselves, seeking the concealment that would allow them to pause and rest.

Albertson dropped his sack of cash and collapsed on it face down, his knees in the dirt, his sweating face dripping onto the leaves of a small seedling. "That shit gets heavy after a while," he gasped. Since Harv also carried the radio, Nash sympathized. Harv was a big guy, obviously fit, but even he had his limits. Mazzola and Quan had each simply sat down on the damp earth, leaning back on their hands, and breathed deeply. Jefferson was down on one knee, his rifle propped in the fork of a bush branch, spreading his map out.

"Harv," Jefferson said, "when you catch your breath, we need to call in. We missed our noon sitrep, and we need to tell them about the money and the kilos." *Kilos*, Nash repeated to himself. Short for KIA, "killed in action," a euphemism for dead bodies. He guessed that was one way to sugarcoat what they had done.

Albertson huffed and puffed a couple times, then pushed himself up until he could spin around and sit on the money bag. Reaching around his neck, he found the mike for the radio, and switched the set on. Taking another breath,

he spoke into the handset. “Four Four Alpha, this is Sierra Two Niner, over.” He waited thirty seconds, and then repeated the call. Another thirty seconds, and then: “Shit!” He shrugged out of his own back pack and the radio, bringing the bulky metal case around in front of him so he could inspect it. He tightened the mike and antenna connections, clicked the tuning knobs back and forth, and called again. Nash was starting to get worried. Without the radio, they would be truly on their own.

Harv’s face suddenly brightened. “Got ‘em” he announced happily, passing the handset over to Jefferson.

“Four Four Alpha, this is Sierra Two Niner Lima,” Trey said into the handset. “I have a sitrep, over.” Nash could barely hear the response, nothing more than a tinny voice surrounded by static, since Trey had the handset pressed to his ear. “Roger, but we were in contact at that time.” Jefferson had apparently been reprimanded for missing the noon call. Nash and the others listened to the one-sided conversation as Trey briefed someone back in Dau Tieng, presumably Captain Banning.

“We spotted three groups of NVA headed south, break. . . Approximately forty, small arms, break. . . This was at position alpha . . . Too many to engage at that time, but later two came back alone. . . Those two tangos are now kilos, over.” Trey paused to listen to questions from the other end. “They were Victor Charlies, one AK-47, one SKS, over.” Another pause. “We recovered some money that had been hidden at that location by the larger group we had seen earlier, over. . . Affirmative, two backpacks full of cash, both American and South Vietnamese. . . We haven’t counted it, but it’s a lot.” Trey looked over questioningly at Nash, and Nash just shrugged.

“Could be a million,” Nash guessed.

“Yes, sir,” Trey responded into the handset. “We think it could be a million, but that’s just a guess. . . Yes, real American dollars, not MPCs.” Trey raised an eyebrow at Nash as he listened to the radio, obviously not pleased with what he was hearing. “We’re on our way to position Bravo, over.” Trey turned the handset up so he could still listen while he spoke to Nash. “He’s checking with Higher. BOHICA.” Nash chuckled. The acronym was a cynical shorthand for “Bend over, here it comes again,” used whenever someone higher in the chain of command announced a change in plans, one that would certainly make life more difficult for those who

received the new orders.

Trey quickly turned his attention to the radio. “”This is two niner lima, over. . . Negative, I cannot give you coordinates at this time. . . Say again . . . This is two niner lima, say again. . .” Nash saw Jefferson take the handset and slap it against his palm, and then jiggled the coiled cord. Putting the handset back to his face, he again spoke: “Four four alpha, this is two niner lima, over. . . This is two niner lima, you’re coming in broken and distorted. . . Say again all after proceed. . . Four four alpha, this is two niner lima, over. . .” Trey shook his head at Nash and kept calling, but apparently received no response. “Lost ‘em,” he finally concluded, giving the handset back to Albertson. “Harv, keep trying. See if you can fix the fuckin’ radio.”

“Did you get anything?” Nash asked, worried about the loss of communications.

Jefferson shrugged. “Something about a mech platoon. I think he was trying to tell us to rendezvous with the guys that brought us out, but I’m not sure. And I definitely don’t know where or when.”

“It’d have to be where they dropped us off, wouldn’t you think?” Nash tried to sound hopeful.

“That’d make sense,” Trey admitted, “since we can’t pinpoint any other locations in this god-damned forest. And they couldn’t be there before tomorrow.”

“So what are we gonna do?” Mazzola asked.

It was a good question. Nash considered the options: they could keep going to OP Bravo, as originally planned, or they could turn around and head back to where they started, in the possibly mistaken belief there would be APCs there to pick them up. In the Army it was doctrine that it was better to do something, even if it’s wrong, than to do nothing, but in this case he wasn’t sure that applied.

“Look,” Nash told them, “we need to redistribute this money so it’s easier to carry, and while we’re doing that we can keep trying to reach Banning on the radio.”

“Right,” Trey agreed. “No need to rush into anything. This is a good spot for now. If we don’t get comms by nightfall, then we can make the decision at that time, and move at night.” They all looked over at Albertson,

who had disconnected the handset cord from the radio and was wiping and blowing on the plug and the socket, and rubbing the contacts with the eraser of a pencil he had brought along. He was on his knees, bending over to shelter the radio from the rain. He looked up, gave them an uncertain expression, and went back to his fiddling.

“Try changing the battery,” Mazzola suggested.

“Did that this morning,” Harv countered. “I only brought two spare batteries. But I’ll try it here in a minute.” The batteries for the PRC-25 were the size and shape of bricks, and nearly as heavy. Three batteries should have been plenty for this mission.

“Keep trying,” Trey encouraged Albertson. “So,” he asked no one in particular, “what do we do with all this money?”

“Buy our own airplane and fly home,” Tony suggested facetiously.

Nash wiggled out of the straps for his own backpack and turned to dig out his poncho. He spread it out on the ground and said, “Let’s dump the cash here and divide into five piles, so we can each carry an equal share.”

“Share?” Trey asked with a wry smile and a raised eyebrow.

Nash felt a little chagrined and embarrassed by the implication of his words. “You know what I mean,” he said. “Equal portion of the load.”

The plastic of the poncho was already developing puddles of rain water.

“I don’t think we want to get the money wet,” Trey noted judiciously. “Just make it heavier. That plastic wrap doesn’t look all that waterproof.” He pulled his backpack off and set it in front of him to withdraw his own poncho. “Maybe we can make a little tent.” He looked around the tiny grove and then pointed to a large bush with a clear area beneath its branches. “That should work.” He went over and spread the poncho on top of the bush, pulling at the edges until it was centered over an open area beneath it. Nash, quickly catching on, picked up his poncho and shook off the water, then crawled under the bush on his knees and laid the poncho out on the ground, glancing up every few seconds to ensure he was directly beneath Trey’s poncho.

“Yeah, now we’re cooking with gas,” Mazzola beamed, admiring their handiwork. Aside from a few residual drops from the leaves underneath Trey’s poncho, the lower poncho was staying relatively dry.

Using his own poncho like a nineteenth century photographer's hood, Albertson kept fiddling with the radio below it, occasionally making radio calls that went unanswered. While Quan and Mazzola maintained a lookout, Trey and Nash dumped the black NVA backpacks out in their makeshift tent and began sorting and stacking the bundles of money.

"Some of this money looks brand new," Nash said as he placed the stacks of bills into neat rows.

"Think it's counterfeit?" Trey asked with little concern.

Nash shrugged. "It's possible, I guess." He picked up a bundle of American one hundred dollar bills around which the plastic was loose and thumbed through it. "Not consecutive serial numbers. Does that mean anything?"

From inside his shroud, Harv said, "Not if they're high quality counterfeits."

"You know about counterfeiting?" Mazzola asked, standing a few feet away.

"I saw a movie once," Albertson explained unapologetically.

"Oh. Okay. So you're an expert."

"Fuck ya, Tony." There was no animosity, just good-natured banter.

"Either way," Nash said, "it's good we have it and not the gooks."

"Roger that," Tony affirmed. "Finders keepers."

Jefferson had been examining the stacks, and then counting how many stacks there were laid out on the lower poncho. Nash hadn't counted, but it looked like several hundred bundles, each more than an inch thick. He saw Trey look upward vacantly, as if doing mental calculations. Then he shook his head as if to clear it.

"I figure there's at least two million here," he announced. "Looks like about half and half, dollars and piasters. They're going to be pissed when they find out it's gone."

"No shit," Harv grumbled, and then made another radio call.

"And they're going to be looking for it," Nash added, as the thought coalesced in his mind.

“But they’ll think it was those two VC that took it,” Tony said. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Trey told him, “but out here, it doesn’t matter who took it, they’ll be looking everywhere. They just want the money back, and won’t be nice to whoever has it.”

Nash, believing he was on the side of righteousness, hadn’t considered that. Just because it was American and South Vietnamese money that he intended to return to its rightful owners didn’t protect him from the wrath of the NVA. Here in the VC National Forest, otherwise known as the Michelin, the NVA and the VC ruled, and by their reckoning the sniper team members were the outlaws, to be hunted down like dogs. Suddenly Nash felt very vulnerable.

Using his forearm like a craps dealer, Trey slid stacks of cash across the poncho, dividing them into five piles. “Everybody take a pile and stick them wherever you can, in your pockets, in your pack, whatever.” He looked at the size of the piles and shook his head slowly. “We may have to dump some of our other supplies to make room. Just don’t dump any ammo or water.”

Albertson continued messing with the radio while the others took their piles and began stuffing bundles of money into their backpacks and pockets. The Army’s jungle fatigues had lots of roomy pockets, both in the pants and the shirt, and soon Nash was bulging all over his body, as were the others.

The black nylon backpacks the VC had used were lightweight enough that Nash was able to fold them up and strap them to the outside of his backpack. Nash had just found a place for the last of his bundles when there was a change in tone coming from under Harv’s poncho. His bored, repetitive radio calls abruptly became louder and excited.

“Four four alpha, this is sierra two niner, roger, I’ve got you lima charlie, over.” Harv threw back the poncho and beamed at the rest of the team as he listened on the handset. “Roger,” he said into the mouthpiece, “here’s two niner lima.” He passed the handset to Trey, who had rushed over to stand beside him.

“Four four alpha, this is sierra two niner lima,” Trey said into the mike. “We believe the amount is two million, I say again, two million. Requesting instructions, over.” Nash watched Trey’s face as the young man listened to whatever was coming through the radio, and saw his expression cloud over.

“Say again, four four alpha, you’re breaking up.” Jefferson looked over

at Nash and mouthed, “Fuck!” Then, back into the mike, “I say again, you are breaking up. Please say again your instructions, over.” Trey closed his eyes and concentrated on what he was hearing. “Four four alpha, this is sierra two niner lima, over.” He repeated the call three times, and then turned the handset back over to Albertson. “Lost ‘em,” he said sourly.

“Harv,” Trey complained, “what the fuck is wrong with the radio?”

“I don’t know,” Harv replied, a touch of whine in his tone.

“Well, what did you do to get through just now? Do that again.”

“I don’t know what I did. It just suddenly started working.”

“And now it doesn’t. Shit! Well, keep trying,”

“Did you get anything?” Nash asked.

Trey sighed. “Not much. He said something about Bravo, and something about three days. I don’t know.”

“Do you think he was saying to go to Bravo and wait there for two days, maybe? And in three days be back where we were dropped off?”

“Could be,” Trey replied without conviction. “Or he could have been saying to forget Bravo and be back where we started in three days. Who fuckin’ knows?” Jefferson rubbed his forehead. “I guess we’ll go with the original plan. Go to Bravo, and keep trying to get comms.”

Nash looked up at the tree tops, observing the drops of water cascading down from the leaves. “The rain’s eased up,” he noted. “Be dark in a couple hours.”

“Harv,” Trey said, “pack up your money, we’re leaving.”

\* \* \* \*

Colonel Le Van Phat was furious. The North Vietnamese Army officer was pacing back and forth in front of the jumbled boards of the former storage shed, cursing at the men around him. The door of the tank had been propped up to fully reveal its emptiness, and the company of soldiers was milling around, pretending to look for clues. “So our ‘little brothers’ have screwed us,” he complained to the lieutenant who commanded the company.

“I knew we should not have trusted them. They are probably already in Saigon, spending the money on whores and beer.”

“Comrade colonel!” one of the soldiers called out excitedly. The young man, whose name Colonel Le neither knew nor cared to know, was holding up a soggy bundle of South Vietnamese money. He was standing in the middle of the remains of the shed, and he quickly hopped over the broken walls to bring his find to the two officers. The lieutenant took it from him and examined the stack of wet cash. The water dripping from it was pink. The lieutenant touched a finger to the water and tasted it.

“Blood,” he announced to the colonel, offering the stack to his senior. The colonel shook his head violently and shuddered, refusing to take it. He hated the sight of blood, a strange weakness for an NVA senior officer, and one he kept hidden as best he could. “Perhaps our little brothers did not steal the money,” the lieutenant suggested politely.

“Over here!” a sergeant shouted from about three hundred meters to the east. Colonel Le followed the lieutenant as they trotted out to where the sergeant stood, near a low clump of bushes. When they reached him, he pointed down, and they saw the bowl-shaped depression behind the bushes. Looking closer, Le saw the bare human foot sticking out from underneath the leaves scattered across the bottom of the hole. By this time several other soldiers had arrived, staring down curiously at the foot. The sergeant ordered two of them to go down in the depression and clear the leaves away. Colonel Le watched with morbid fascination as the two bodies were revealed, recognizing one before turning away at the sight of the second, whose head was a bloody mess. The men in the hole pulled the bodies aside to recover their weapons. The sergeant slid down into the hole to examine the bodies more closely.

“One shot each,” he proclaimed authoritatively. He picked up the AK and dropped the magazine into his hand. “They did not shoot back. There was probably a sniper.”

“American?” the colonel asked suspiciously.

“Undoubtedly, comrade colonel,” the sergeant replied. “The puppet forces do not use snipers. They are too cowardly.”

“We must report this,” the colonel stated. “Where is the radio man?”

By the time darkness had fallen, a tent had been erected next to the old shack for the colonel, and the rest of the soldiers had been ordered to dig hasty bunkers and spider holes in a perimeter around the shed. While the men ate cold rice, the colonel dined on hot pho, savoring the noodles and the tiny pieces of chicken. The lieutenant ducked into the tent and saluted. "Our intelligence comrades have confirmed that the Americans have the money. They intercepted a message between the men who have the money and their headquarters. We have been jamming their radio signals, so the men here in the Michelin do not know what they are supposed to do now."

"Do *we* know?" the colonel asked impatiently.

"Yes," the captain answered. "They are supposed to meet up with an armored infantry unit tomorrow."

"Where?"

"That we do not know."

"We must find them first," the colonel said emphatically. "That money is vital to our upcoming offensive. Tomorrow you will divide your troops up into search parties, and scout in all directions."

# SEVEN

“Maybe we missed it,” Nash suggested, the rain dripping off the brim of his boonie hat.

“How could we miss a fucking road?” Trey responded angrily. Nash believed—hoped—that Jefferson was mad at the situation, and not at Nash for his comment. The rain had resumed late in the afternoon, and now, almost four hours after sundown, it was still raining. They had been traveling straight east, along the endless line of rubber trees, so they simply could not be totally lost. According to the map, they should have long ago crossed a north-south road that would orient them toward their next observation post.

“In the rain, and the darkness. . .” Nash let his voice trail off.

“There was that ditch,” Albertson suggested. “Maybe that’s where the road was.”

The five men stood in the dubious shelter of one of the giant rubber trees, surrounded by darkness and rain, miserable and tired. It had been a long hard slog across the plantation, carrying the extra weight of the money and worrying about being seen by the enemy. At every pause to rest Harv had tried to make radio contact and failed. For Nash, it was made even worse by the fact that they were heading east, away from Dau Tieng and potential rescue, seeking the elusive OP Bravo. Although he had agreed with Jefferson at the time, he now was convinced they had made the wrong decision. Jefferson knelt down and pulled the hood of his poncho up so he could duck down beneath the cover and shine his flashlight on the map. Nash heard him muttering over the patter of the rain on the leaves above them and on his poncho.

“It’s got to be here,” Trey insisted to no one in particular. Nash heard him click off the flashlight and then pull the hood of the poncho back over his head as he stood up. While he stuffed the map back in his pocket, Jefferson took a deep breath. “We just haven’t gone far enough,” he announced. “I was counting trees, but then I lost count. We got to keep going. We’ve got

to cross a road at some point, regardless.”

While Nash was worried about their indeterminate location, he was secretly relieved that he wasn't the one in charge, and thus could not be blamed. That was one positive aspect of the Army hierarchy—it put all the responsibility on one man's shoulders, and left the rest of them blameless, at least in theory. And he trusted Jefferson, despite the occasional setbacks. They had been sent out into an area with virtually no landmarks, an area they were almost totally unfamiliar with, to perform a mission that had been vague to begin with, and had now changed to something entirely different. Trey had only slightly more experience than the rest of them, and had only been a sergeant for a couple months, so he couldn't be expected to know everything about leadership already.

“Here!” It was Quan, calling to them from about thirty yards away. In the dark, Nash had not noticed when Quan had wandered on ahead. “Here is road.” Nash and the others followed his voice, walking because they were too tired to run.

As they caught up with Quan, Nash realized that the rain had stopped, and the only drops that fell on him were those still dripping off the leaves of the canopy. He also noticed that the almost impenetrable darkness that they had previously been pushing through was noticeably diminished, and he could actually make out the vertical lines of tree trunks and the bulky shapes of his companions. Presumably the clouds had parted and moonlight was now filtering down through the trees, somehow making the plantation even more ghostly and frightening. Quan was standing in the middle of the road, which was now very apparent due to the diffused silver light from above. It was a fairly wide dirt road that had seen heavy use, at least at some point in the past. Wheel ruts were fairly deep, but mostly softened by a thin layer of scattered dead leaves.

“”Finally,” Jefferson muttered. Nash and the others gathered around him to find out what they would do next. Inwardly Nash wondered if this was the road they had been looking for, or was it perhaps a different one. He was no longer even sure what direction was north. He was entirely dependent on Trey now, and he hoped his faith was justified.

“According to the map,” Trey told them quietly, “there's some sort of building a couple clicks up the road. Bravo is just beyond it.” Trey looked

down and scuffed his feet on the damp earth. “This road looks like it’s been traveled recently, so we’ve got to be careful we don’t meet someone along the way. Let’s parallel the road on the other side of that second line of trees.” He pointed toward the rows of rubber trees to the east. “Harv, try the radio again.”

While Albertson again attempted to contact the rear, Nash walked over to one of the trees, unbuttoned his trousers, and took a long satisfying piss. He remembered the warnings he had received in training about the odor of American urine being distinctive, but since they weren’t staying here, he decided it didn’t matter. Besides, with all the rain, it would soon dissipate. When he rejoined the group, Harv was still calling, but clearly was having no success.

“Okay, never mind,” Jefferson told him. “Let’s move out. Quan, you want to take point?”

The building was about the size and shape of a single-bay gas station, and appeared to be built of cinder block. Although the roof beams remained, the actual roof covering had disappeared, perhaps scavenged for other purposes. It was in a clearing on the east side of the road, and there were round and angular shapes in the yard around it, the purpose of which was indeterminable in the dimness.

“What do you think?” Jefferson asked. They had all taken a knee about fifty yards away, observing the building and its surroundings for any sign of human presence. Nash was tremendously relieved that they had even found the place, because now they actually knew where they were, and could call in their coordinates. Assuming, of course, they could ever make radio contact. Nash and Trey had mounted their starlight scopes hours earlier, when it had just gotten dark, and Nash now switched his on and brought his rifle up so he could scan the area. The grainy green image clarified what he was seeing: a rectangular building with small windows, and a yard littered with what appeared to be rusting mechanical equipment, broken crates, and cylindrical storage tanks.

“No lights, no movement,” Nash announced. Beside him Trey had also begun observing through his starlight scope.

“I got same-same,” Jefferson agreed. “Let’s go check it out.”

Nash lowered his rifle and closed his right eye, since the starlight image had temporarily destroyed his night vision on that side. "Think we should?" he asked dubiously. "Might be some gooks sleeping in there."

Jefferson paused to consider that. "I doubt it," he finally said. "And if there are, we need to know it before we set up our OP. Don't you think?"

"I guess," Nash acknowledged reluctantly. He would have preferred to skirt around the building far to the east and avoid any possible confrontation.

"Nash, you take Quan and circle around to the north side. Harv, you cross the road and come in from the west. Tony, you approach from the east. I'll move up from here. If anybody sees anything, whistle. Give Nash and Quan time to get into position. Got it?"

Everyone grunted affirmatively, and they split up. Nash, Quan, and Tony moved east and then north, skirting the building at a good distance. Tony dropped off when he was in position while Nash and Quan continued around until they were directly north of the clearing, and then began approaching the building slowly, pausing at each rubber tree so Nash could scope out the area with his starlight. He could see Harv and Tony on his right and left, creeping up on the building with even more caution, since they didn't have the advantage of the starlights. Nash was glad to see that Harv had the sense to go prone at the edge of the road, rather than continue across it. He saw Tony reach a metal box of some sort and crouch behind it. Motioning to Quan to hold his position, Nash made a quiet dash to the side of the building, pressing himself up against the side just a foot from one of the windows.

He listened intently, but all he could hear was his own labored breathing. He wished they had dumped their packs before they began this approach, but there was no use crying over spilt milk. Slowly he pushed the suppressor of his rifle through the glass-less window and edged over until he could inspect the interior with his scope. The room sprang into view, an empty space with a few large objects littering the floor. His heart froze for an instance when he saw a lumpy shape on the floor, but it soon resolved itself to be a pile of old canvas. There were some broken down metal tables, some auto parts, and what might have been a desk, but otherwise the room was empty. In the far corner at the back a small section was walled off, perhaps a small office or a restroom, and on the opposite wall he could see Trey and his

rifle in a window, doing the same thing as he was.

“Clear,” Nash announced quietly.

“Yep, clear,” Trey replied. Both men pulled their rifles back and headed toward the front of the building.

“Quan, Tony, up front,” Nash called out just loud enough for them to hear.

The front of the building had two main openings, a person-sized door on the right and a bay door big enough to accommodate a truck. Between those two doors was a single window, one that appeared to have never been glazed, but it did have a corrugated tin awning over it. The smaller opening to the right still held a partially open wooden door hanging mostly straight on rusty hinges. The bigger opening on the left was gaping, and any doors it might have had were long gone. The concrete floor just inside the opening was littered with junk, and Nash could make out some automotive wheels and an old engine.

“Knock knock, anybody home?” Harv joked as he came up to join them.

Trey cut him off with a sharp command. “Harv, try the radio again. Quan, you watch the north, Tony you watch the south. Nash and I will check out the inside.” Tony and Quan quickly moved out to the edge of the road and knelt down, while Albertson again began making radio calls. Nash and Trey stepped around the junk at the larger entrance and moved inside, walking carefully and repeatedly using the starlight scopes to sweep the room. Nash worked his way to the back, where the small room was located, and jerked the door open as he jumped aside. The only thing that came out was a horrible smell. The room was indeed a restroom, one that had overflowed and backed up to the point it was unbearable to be near. Holding his breath, Nash pushed the door closed again and walked away before he resumed breathing.

“Bad?” Trey asked.

“Can’t you smell it?”

Trey sniffed. “Oh, shit, that’s terrible!”

“All the modern conveniences,” Nash said.

“Let’s get out of here,” Trey insisted, coughing.

When they emerged, Harv was still talking into the handset, but the discouragement in his voice told Nash he was still having no luck.

“Now what?” Nash asked Trey. “On to the OP?”

“Yeah. It’s about two clicks north and east of here. We need to get there, find a hide, and get some rest.”

“Roger that,” Nash agreed.

Quan appeared next to them, having run up without making a sound somehow. “People coming!” Quan hissed urgently, pointing back to the north.

Instinctively Nash knelt down and brought the rifle to his shoulder, pressing his eye against the starlight scope. Beside him he heard Trey whisper, “Harv, shush!”

At first Nash could only see trees and the portion of the road closest to them. Cautiously he rose and side-stepped around some broken-down equipment until he could see farther down the road, then knelt again. Through the scope he could now see a group of men strolling down the road toward them. They were in a loose formation, and he could see they were wearing pith helmets and carrying weapons.

“Looks like an NVA squad, all armed,” Nash whispered to Trey. “About two hundred yards out.”

“Harv, go get Tony,” Trey ordered. “We’ll hide in the building,” he told Nash. Wait there until they go by. There’s too many of them to take on right now.”

Nash could feel his heart racing, but he forced his breathing to remain slow and steady. Lying on the concrete floor, something was digging into his left hip, but he didn’t dare move to dislodge it. He could now hear the desultory chatter of the NVA as they got closer, and through his starlight he could now clearly see the men and their weapons. There were seven men, six of them with AK-47s, and one with an RPG launcher and a bag of rockets on his back. Nash had taken a prone position just inside the garage area, using what appeared to be the rear suspension of a small truck as cover, his rifle

poking through the leaf springs at the approaching enemy, his elbows resting on a wheel and tire that lay on its side. He had extended the legs of the bipod to raise the barrel as much as possible. Quan was to his right, pressed against the north wall behind a tall metal five-drawer tool cabinet, from which one of the drawers was upside down on the floor, and the others hung half-opened. Trey and Tony were on either side of the window to his left, and Harv was standing next to the door, his back to the wall and his M-79 grenade launcher locked and loaded. All of them had dropped their packs in the center of the building to give themselves more freedom of movement, then covered them with the old canvas.

As the NVA soldiers came abreast of the building, Nash was silently urging them to keep moving, but to no avail. The men stopped and milled around, talking in low voices that showed no sign of concern. One of the men separated from the group and walked toward the building. Nash tracked him with his rifle, his finger slowly increasing pressure on the trigger, but the man finally stopped and sat down on a crate left lying in the front yard. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes—Marlboros, Nash was not entirely surprised to see—and lit one up. A couple of the other men ambled over and mooched cigarettes from the first guy. Of the remaining four, the guy with the RPGs wandered away to the opposite side of the road, apparently looking for a place to take a dump, and the other three squatted down in the middle of the road and drank from their canteens.

One of the smokers strolled around, and then approached the open bay doorway, kicking at the smaller pieces of junk, apparently just curious about what might be inside. Nash held his breath and kept his weapon pointed at the man's chest with the least and slowest movement he could manage. The man peered into the blackness of the interior, surely unable to actually see anything. Nash could smell the man's cigarette smoke, and even detected a hint of body odor, the man was so close. But then one of the other smokers said something, and the one standing just above Nash answered and turned to rejoin his companions. Nash exhaled in relief. He looked over at Quan, who was virtually invisible in the dark, wishing the young man was close enough to translate.

The three smokers finished their cigarettes, pinched off the burning ends with their fingers, and slipped the butts into pockets. Lazily they strolled back to the middle of the road and joined the three there, who rose from their

squatting positions and adjusted their weapons. The seventh man, the one with the RPGs, was still off in the darkness somewhere. The men on the road called to him in mocking tones, and Nash heard the man reply angrily. What a time for that guy to get diarrhea, Nash thought, just as they were getting ready to leave. Then everything happened at once.

“Tango two four,” a tinny voice squawked from over by Harv. Instantly Nash knew that Harv had left the radio on, and someone, probably not with their unit but on the same frequency, had just made a radio call that their malfunctioning set actually picked up. Harv had the volume way down, but in the stillness of the plantation it was still loud enough for Nash to hear, and so did the NVA. Through his scope he saw them all freeze and turn their heads toward the sound, and he knew their next move would be to scatter and open fire. Before that could happen, Nash squeezed the trigger, and as he felt the recoil and heard the pop of the round and the clacking of his rifle’s bolt, he saw his target jerk and then collapse in a heap. A split second later he heard Trey’s rifle fire, and a second man went down. The others ran toward the trees on the far side of the road to seek shelter, diving toward the ground.

Nash tracked one of the runners and fired again, seeing the man spin around and fall on his back. Trey took a second to watch, and saw the man was using his legs to push himself along the ground, still trying to escape despite the fact he was obviously wounded. Nash fired again, and the man stopped moving, so Nash swung the sight right and left, seeking another target. To his left he could hear Trey and Tony firing, and then a deep echoing “pomp” as Harv launched a grenade that exploded a second later out beyond where the NVA had gone to ground. Nash saw movement behind a tree and pulled off a quick round that apparently missed. *Take your time*, he told himself, watching the tree for any other sign of movement. Suddenly the barrel of an AK poked around and let loose a stream of automatic fire that raked the front of the building and caused Nash to duck involuntarily. Chastising himself, he again assumed a good firing position and found that tree in his scope. He saw a hunched shape barely visible on the right side of the tree, clearly the back of the man who had just fired at them, and Nash quickly breathed out, steadied the rifle, and fired. The man staggered back from behind the tree, clutching at his back, and then fell to his knees and collapsed on his side.

At least four men were down, but two AKs opened up on the building,

spraying the window and doorways with rounds that clunked into the cinder blocks and whanged off the metal junk, forcing Nash and the others to take cover. And then it got worse. An RPG, trailing sparks and smoke, whooshed out of the trees and zoomed right over Nash's head, exploding against the door to the small bathroom. Shrapnel and chunks of concrete spewed across the room, and Nash felt something hit the bottom of his boot. Then he heard the grunt of pain on his left. "I'm hit!" Jefferson cried through gritted teeth.

Nash's mind was racing as he tried to figure out what he should do, with only seconds to decide. The AK fire suddenly stopped, probably so they could put in new magazines, and as soon as it did he heard and felt Quan sprint across the room behind him, going to Jefferson's aid. That, at least, solved one problem. At the same time Tony popped up and fired several bursts with his M-16 on auto, and Harv popped another grenade from his M-79, this one exploding closer in, hopefully near the two shooters. Doing another mental calculation, Nash confirmed four of the NVA were down, leaving only the two AKs and the RPG. And he needed to take that RPG gunner out before he could launch another rocket-propelled grenade at the building. The RPG had come from the right front, so Nash scanned the area with his starlight, moving as slowly as his excited state allowed so as not to miss anything.

There! He saw a figure crouching behind a tree trunk, and at the same time one of the AKs opened up again, bullets slashing through the air above him. He ignored them, and watched the kneeling figure lean out from behind the tree, his RPG launcher on his shoulder and aimed right at Nash. There was no time to check his breathing or stock weld, he just pulled the trigger firmly back and felt the recoil as his rifle fired. That recoil had moved the scope, but he immediately re-centered it on the target, and was surprised to see the man staggering to his feet, the launcher still on his shoulder. Without thinking, Nash fired again, center mass, and was shocked when the man exploded in a ball of flame, body parts flying in all directions. The flare temporarily overwhelmed the starlight scope and blinded Nash's right eye. He closed that eye and searched with his left, trying to penetrate the darkness of the plantation, while he wondered what had just happened. Had his bullet actually hit the detonator on the end of the rocket still in the launcher, or had his round gone through the man and set off one of the rockets on his back? He realized it didn't make any difference, and forced his mind back to the

matters at hand.

Another of Harv's M-79 grenades burst to his left, hitting one of the trees about six feet off the ground, splintering the trunk but failing to topple it. The AK-47 fire halted, and Tony rose up and sprayed the trees with M-16 fire. When Tony's bolt locked to the rear on the now-empty magazine, Nash listened for any response. The open area across the road remained silent, although Nash thought he heard a moan. The firing had pretty much deafened him, so he couldn't be sure.

"Trey!" Nash whispered hoarsely, "how bad is it?"

"My leg," Jefferson answered through gritted teeth.

"And back," Quan said calmly. "Many wounds."

"Shit," Tony said, "I'm bleeding, too."

"Where?" Nash demanded.

"Back of my leg. Don't hurt much. Maybe just a scratch."

"How about you, Harv?" Nash asked, a little more loudly.

"I'm okay," Albertson replied. "But the radio's fucked."

"What?"

"Won't turn on at all." Nash could hear him fumbling with the set.  
"Looks like it took some shrapnel. Probably saved my ass."

"Are the gooks all dead?" Tony asked worriedly.

"They've stopped shooting," Nash pointed out. "That's a good sign."

"Who's gonna go check it out?" Tony asked, clearly not volunteering.

Nash sighed, resigned to the inevitability. "Me. Cover me."

Nash pushed himself to his feet and eased over to the edge of the doorway. Blinking away the orange spot that lingered on his right eyeball, he brought the starlight scope up and peered through it, sweeping the area across the road in gradual steps. He saw the lumpy shapes of bodies, but no movement. Taking a deep breath, he rushed out the door and scuttled over to crouch behind one of the crates in the yard. There was no gunfire, for which he was extremely grateful. He took in a few gulping breaths, trying to calm his nerves, and then held his breath for a few seconds to listen. There was a quiet moan from across the road, the sound of someone weak and in pain.

“Tony,” Nash said over his shoulder, “you got Trey’s starlight?”

“Yo,” Mazzola answered.

“Come on, help me search the area.” Nash could sense Mazzola’s hesitation, but then there was some scuffling and Tony darted out of the bay door and ran to kneel behind a pile of rusty steel a few feet away from Nash, Jefferson’s XM-21 clutched in his hands.

“They’re all down,” Nash reassured Tony, wishing he really believed that himself. “I’ll check the area to the right, you go left.” Rising up, Nash began walking slowly to the road, keeping his rifle up to his shoulder and the scope pressed to his right eye, while using his left eye to keep him oriented on his surroundings. The first man he had shot still lay in the middle of the road. While Nash continued to scan the area through his scope, he nudged the body with his boot. There was no response, but Nash needed to be sure. The man was lying on his side, his knees drawn up, so Nash kicked him in the balls, knowing no man alive could suffer that without responding. Nothing. Nash moved on.

Nash didn’t bother to check out the RPG gunner; he knew that man was gone forever, so he slow-walked over to where he believed the other three men he and Trey had shot should be. They were all definitely dead as well—one’s eyes were blankly open, and his forehead had a gaping hole in it. Another lay on his side, his motionless hands entangled in the bowels that spilled out of his stomach, and the third just lay on his back staring blankly at the sky.

Shaking his head, Nash was both satisfied by his proficiency with the rifle, and disturbed by what it had caused. Although he had left the church several years ago, his Catholic indoctrination still haunted him. Yes, this was war, but it was still killing. He put it out of his mind and walked over toward Tony. A shadowy figure to his left gave Nash a brief jolt of fear, until he realized it was Albertson, who had come out to stand in the road.

“These two are dead as doornails,” Tony remarked when Nash approached him.

“Then who was moaning? Where’s the other guy? There should be three guys over here.”

“There he goes,” Harv called out excitedly, pointing through the trees.

Nash brought up his rifle and peered through the starlight. In a stumbling run, a man was escaping down the lane of rubber trees, one arm dangling unnaturally from his side, the other still holding an AK-47. Nash knelt down on one knee, steadied his aim, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger. The distant figure went sprawling forward, made one jerky movement, and then lay still.

“All right!” Tony said admiringly. He, too, had been following the man with his starlight. “That’s all of them.”

Nash lowered his rifle and was beset with indecision. He needed Trey to take charge, but Trey was wounded and not out here, which, in effect, put Nash in charge. And he did not really want to be. Harv and Tony stood there looking at him, obviously expecting him to tell them what to do next. Nash mentally threw up his hands and cursed under his breath. Then he did what he wanted to avoid, which was to take command of the team, such as it was.

“Harv, gather up all the weapons and ammo. Tony, you keep watch, three-sixty, in case someone heard the firefight and is coming to check it out. I’m going in to check on Trey.” Without a word the two men followed his instructions, with Tony bringing the starlight-scoped rifle to his shoulder and slowly pivoting in the middle of the road, and Harv trotting off to get the AK from the man who had tried to escape. Nash nodded, surprised at himself, and hurried back into the building.

“How you doing, Trey?” he asked, kneeling down next to the man, who was now stretched out on the floor on his right side. Nash propped his rifle against the wall. Quan had pulled Trey’s shirt up around his neck and was tying off a field dressing, white against the man’s dark-skinned back.

“I’ve been better,” Jefferson said with a wince.

“How bad?” Nash asked Quan.

Quan picked up a flashlight and clicked it on, its red lens doing little to illuminate the scene. Aiming it at Trey’s back, he said, “Many small wounds in back. Shrapnel, rocks.” He moved the beam down to Trey’s right thigh, where another field dressing had been wrapped tightly over his trousers. The center of the dressing was soaked through with blood, which looked grey in the red light, and the blot seemed to be growing as Nash watched. Quan shook his head slowly without saying anything. Nash nodded in understanding. There was no point in alarming Trey any more than he

already was. Quan reached down to the floor beside him and brought up a twisted piece of metal still glistening with blood. Nash guessed that it was one of the tailfins of the RPG. "I wash out with water, but it very deep," Quan told him.

"Thank you," Nash said, and it was heartfelt. Quan had really come through and done everything he could. Nash put his hand on Trey's shoulder. "Hey, man, think you can walk?" Nash hated to ask, but they simply couldn't stay where they were.

"Probably," Trey grunted, and then coughed. Nash immediately became alarmed. What if Trey's lung had been punctured by one of those pieces of shrapnel?

"You having any trouble breathing?" he asked anxiously.

Trey coughed again. "Naw, it's just this dust on the floor, and the stink from that shitter."

Until Jefferson pointed it out, Nash hadn't really noticed the smell, which permeated the room. He, too, coughed.

"See?" Trey chuckled. Gingerly he pushed himself up into a sitting position, and Nash and Quan each grabbed an arm to pull him upright.

Trey stood up, weaving slightly, so Nash held on loosely to his left bicep. "Yeah," Trey said, "I can do this." Then he took a step and put weight on his right leg. "Ahhh!" he cried out as the leg folded underneath him, and only Nash's and Quan's support kept him from falling on his face. They lowered him to a sitting position on the floor. "Or not," Trey admitted with a groan.

Nash asked for Quan's flashlight and checked his watch. It was still hours until dawn. The sound of the firefight would have carried at least a mile in the plantation, and surely some other NVA or VC had heard it. Undoubtedly they would be coming to investigate. Nash rapidly considered all the options, and didn't like any of them.

"What do you think we should do, Trey?" Nash asked, hoping the sergeant would have a better idea.

"Fuck if I know," Jefferson gasped, clutching his leg. "This hurts like a motherfucker. Did you get all the gooks?"

“Yeah, we got ‘em all. But someone probably heard the shooting.”

Trey groaned. “Okay,” he panted, “okay. Find me something to use as a crutch.” In the dim moonlight filtering in through the open bay door, Nash could see Quan looking at him and shaking his head. He had to agree: Trey was in no condition to walk, even with a crutch.

Nash still had the flashlight, and quickly he unscrewed the lens cap and removed the red filter. Sweeping the yellow beam around the room, he mentally catalogued the furniture and junk, pausing for a moment to look at the hole in the bathroom wall, imagining he could actually see the noxious fumes emanating from the broken toilet. A metal table with only two legs, a desk, various boards and sheets of corrugated tin, and various auto parts—that’s what he had to work with. He walked over to the wall cabinet and searched through the greasy drawers, finding mostly nuts and bolts and oily motor parts. Finally he found what he was looking for—a rusty adjustable crescent wrench.

# EIGHT

When Nash was in high school he had taken Auto Shop class, and had worked part-time in a local gas station/garage, so he knew his way around mechanical things. Worried about the danger of additional enemy troops, he scrambled through the debris on the floor of the building, picking up and sometimes discarding parts and items, visually estimating sizes and shapes, and collecting some of them in a pile near the bay door. As he was doing this, Harv returned with an armful of AK-47s and a couple ammo vests filled with magazines, dumping them on the floor just inside the smaller door.

“Now what?” Harv asked, curiously watching Nash’s frantic searching and collecting.

“Trey can’t walk,” Nash explained without pausing in his efforts. “We’ve got to build him a cart of some sort.”

“With what?”

“Yeah,” Trey groaned from the floor, “how you gonna do that?”

“I don’t know,” Nash told them distractedly. “I’m still working on it. I think I can use this rear end, bolt a couple wheels on it, and put that table on top. Maybe.”

Quan cleared his throat loudly, so Nash swung the flashlight over to see the young Vietnamese holding an AK vertically in his left hand, and a canvas ammo vest stuffed with banana clip magazines in his right, a questioning look on his face. His point was obvious—he wanted to be armed, just like the rest of them. Nash glanced over at Trey, still nominally the man in charge, but Trey just shrugged. As far as Nash was concerned, Quan had earned the right to bear arms. “Yes,” he told Quan simply. “Go out and help Tony keep watch. See how bad his wound is.” Quan smiled and darted out of the building.

“Harv,” Nash said, moving over to the truck suspension, “help me out here.” Harv set his M-79 down and joined Nash next to the assembly, which

consisted of a rear axle and differential with brake drums and hubs on the ends, a drive shaft connected by a universal joint, and two leaf springs on either end of the axle. "Lift up this end," Nash instructed, and as Harv raised one end of the axle about a foot, Nash brought the wheel he had been using as a gun rest up to a vertical position and twisted and rotated it until it slid onto the studs of the hub. He squeezed the tire again, as he had earlier when he had been preparing to shoot, and told himself it was holding enough air to work. He had found three other wheels in the building, but one's tire was shredded, and another one left leaning against a wall was totally flat. Fortunately the remaining tire seemed to be as inflated as it had been when it was first installed, so he rolled it over and mounted it as Harv lifted the other end of the axle. In one of the drawers he found a few lug nuts that fit well enough to hold the wheels in place.

Picking up the drive shaft in both hands, Nash pulled at the assembly, and was extremely relieved with both wheels rolled a few inches. He was not so happy, however, that the drive shaft had twisted in his hands, since it was still connected to the wheels through the differential gears. The drive shaft would have to go. "Hold the light," Nash told Harv while he picked up the wrench. It was a struggle, but he managed to unbolt one end of the U-joint, letting the drive shaft drop to the concrete floor with a clang.

Trey whimpered, and Nash looked over to see the young man with his eyes squeezed shut, beads of sweat on his forehead, and his skin seeming to go pale. "I think he's going into shock," Nash told Harv. "Uh, get your poncho liner." While Harv dug through his pack, Nash went over and tried to make Jefferson more comfortable, shifting him onto his back and lifting his head in his arms. "It's okay, buddy, just take it easy. We'll get you out of here in no time." He took the poncho liner from Harv and stuffed it under Trey's head. "There you go," he said in as reassuring a voice as he could manage under the circumstances.

"Get Trey's poncho," Nash instructed Harv, while he patted Jefferson's arm. "Hey, Trey, you want some water?" he asked, trying to sound unconcerned. Nash had been trained on how to treat shock, and he hoped he remembered the training correctly.

Trey's rapid breathing slowed a little, and with dry lips he gasped, "Yeah, that'd be good."

Trey pulled out his own canteen and tilted it over Trey's mouth, letting a dribble of water splash against his lips and tongue. Trey lapped it up, and then turned his head when he had had enough. "Thanks," Trey whispered.

"No sweat, GI," Nash said. He had Harv spread the poncho over Trey's recumbent form. "You just rest," he told Trey. "We'll be right over here, fixing you up a royal carriage. Okay?"

"With air conditioning, right?" Trey said, sounding a little stronger. Nash was really glad to hear Trey make a joke, because he had become really worried that Trey was going to get even worse.

"You got it, man," Nash said with laugh. "And power windows, too."

With that crisis averted, Nash returned to his mechanical labors. With Harv's help he dragged the metal table over and positioned it upside down on top of the truck suspension. After warning Quan and Tony outside, he used one of the other AK-47s to shoot holes in the thin sheet metal top of the table at the four corners, and used some U-bolts he had found to secure the table to the spring shackles on the suspension. The two remaining legs of the table made ideal handles, and he and Harv found they had no problem pulling the make-shift cart. Quickly they gathered up all the back packs and placed them on the cart as neatly as they could, and took Trey's poncho off him and spread it out over the packs. The lip around the edge of the upside-down table kept the packs from sliding off.

With Trey using his good leg and his arms, they got him up and laid him down on the poncho-covered mound, helping him find a comfortable position on his side and trying to keep the cart from tipping forward. They gave Trey Tony's M-16 to hold, and Harv and Nash picked up their own weapons. One quick sweep of the flashlight to see if they were leaving anything behind, and Nash saw the other AK's jumbled on the floor. "Shit!" he muttered. "We've got to do something with those."

"Throw 'em in the shitter," Harv suggested, and Nash chastised himself for not thinking of that idea himself. Leaving the cart for a moment, he and Albertson picked up the guns, held their breath, walked over, and dropped the weapons down the gaping hole one at time, hearing them splash. As soon as the last gun was gone, Nash ran back to the cart to get a breath of relatively clean air. He and Harv hunched over gasping for a moment.

"Think they'll try and retrieve them?" Harv asked, straightening up and

chuckling.

“Would you?”

“No fuckin’ way,” Harv said. “But I’m not a gook.”

“Go easy on that ‘gook’ shit around Quan,” Nash warned him gently. “He’s doing okay.”

“Yeah, well, Quan’s different.”

“I know, just be sure *he* knows.”

They grabbed the legs of the cart and brought it horizontal. “You ready, your highness,” Nash asked Trey.

“Home, James,” Trey answered imperiously, and laughed.

They pulled the cart out to the road, where Tony and Quan stood guard.

“Cool!” Tony said when he saw the cart. “And now I don’t have to carry that pack.”

“And you get to walk point, too,” Nash told him. “You want your sixteen?”

“Naw,” Tony said, “I like having this starlight. I might switch when it gets light, though.”

“How bad is your wound?” Nash inquired.

“Just a scratch,” Tony said dismissively. “Already stopped bleeding, I think. So, which direction?”

“Southwest,” Nash said. “We need to get Trey to Dau Tieng ASAP.”

“Roger that,” Tony said. “Down this row?” He waved the long rifle toward the lane of trees leading straight away from the front of the building.

“For now,” Nash agreed. “We need to get as far from here as we can, as fast as we can.”

“Wagons, ho!” Tony intoned, and took off at a steady pace.

“Quan, you be our rear guard, okay?” Nash said. Quan nodded his head rapidly, a look of determination on his face. He had put on the ammo vest, and held the AK lovingly. Nash had his rifle in his right hand, and a table leg in his left. Harv was on the other side, holding the other table leg. Nash nodded at him, and they began pulling the cart forward, following Tony.

“Rides pretty good,” Trey commented. “Not like a Cadillac, maybe, but better than a Ford.”

“We aim to please, sir,” Nash replied lightly. “Tell all your friends.”

“He hasn’t got any friends,” Harv said. “He’s a sergeant.” They all laughed.

Although the cart rolled easily across the leaf-covered ground of the plantation, it was still awkward to pull it with his left hand, Nash found, while also holding it level and carrying the XM-21 rifle with the starlight scope in his right hand. After only a few hundred yards he had Harv stop so Nash could lay his rifle down next to Trey, who seemed very quiet. Looking closer, he could see that Trey had gone to sleep, his breathing slow and regular. Nash hoped that was a good sign. He checked the pistol on his belt to ensure it was locked and loaded, and easily accessible, then grabbed the table leg to hold the cart level so Harv could do his own readjustments. The M-79 grenade launcher that Albertson carried was like a short, single-barrel shotgun, and it broke open at the breech for loading. Harv opened his weapon, which was loaded, and stuffed the barrel inside his web belt, with the wooden stock hanging down in front of him. It looked ridiculous, but that was the only safe way he could carry it no-handed when it was loaded. If needed, he could pull it up out of his belt, snap it shut, and fire within a second or two.

“Trey’s asleep,” Nash whispered to Harv as the other man got a better grip on his table leg. “Think that means something?”

“Means he’s tired,” Harv answered. “I’d be sleeping if I could. And he lost a lot of blood, too. Probably better if he sleeps.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Okay, let’s move out.”

Rolling again, it took them several minutes to catch up to Tony, who had not been aware of their brief stop. They continued on, still heading straight west down the rows of rubber trees, until Nash called another short halt while he checked the compass he had borrowed from Trey without waking him up.

“Let’s head south a while,” Nash told the others, who were taking advantage of the stop to get a drink from their canteens. The hands of his watch were no longer glowing enough to read, but he guessed it was still a

couple hours until dawn. He was exhausted, and he assumed the others were equally tired, making him question any decision he or they might make. But they had to keep moving while they had the protection of the darkness, and find some place to lay up by dawn. Nash gulped down some tepid water from his own canteen, and then set them all in motion again, at a right angle to their previous route, down a different but almost identical lane of tall grey trees. His head was so foggy that he even began to doubt they had actually turned, and worried they were still headed west.

“Nash!” Quan hissed urgently right beside him. Nash had not heard the man run up to them, and was startled by his sudden appearance. Quan held up a hand to indicate they should stop, so Nash and Harv halted and began looking around. Nash put his hand on the butt of his pistol, and Harv withdrew his M-79 and closed it with a click. Quan ran ahead to alert Tony, and then rushed back to the cart. “Listen!” he told them, looking back toward the way they had come. Nash closed his eyes—for some reason that helped him concentrate on faint sounds—and tried to pick out any noises that didn’t seem to belong. And there they were.

It was the sound of angry voices in the far distance, shouted orders and cries of discovery. Then there was a burst of AK-47 fire, followed by more furious orders.

“I guess they found the bodies,” Trey said. Nash was surprised to hear from him, having assumed he was still asleep.

“We haven’t gotten as far as I thought,” Nash muttered, worried that the enemy could follow them.

“Sound really travels at night,” Harv offered hopefully

“But this cart’s probably leaving tracks,” Nash countered. “We’ll be easy to follow once it gets light.”

“Then we better get a move on,” Trey told them.

On through the night they traveled, heading south for a while, and then west for a while, with Nash trying to estimate if they were heading generally southwest at the right angle to reach Dau Tieng. At some point it began to rain again, and Nash hoped that would somehow erase their tracks, but he had his doubts. Trey had gone back to sleep, and Nash found himself stumbling

occasionally as the long hours of tension and physical effort took their toll.

Nash noted groggily that they were now having to detour around small stands of vegetation, and shook his head to clear it. The rows of trees were now almost visible, as the darkness of night gradually eased into the gray light of morning, water dripping from the sky and glistening on the ground. The trees were smaller here, and there were patches of cloudy sky starting to appear overhead. Nash wondered if they had found the same area where they had hidden the day before; it was possible, but there was no way to be sure. Regardless, the brush offered concealment and a place to rest, which they needed desperately.

“Tony,” Nash called out quietly, “find us a place to hide.” Tony nodded.

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“Close the curtain,” Colonel Garfield ordered, and Captain Banning pulled the sheet of canvas across the door of the small conference room in the brigade tactical operations center. As the lowest ranking man in the room, Banning stayed standing while the other three officers sat down in metal folding chairs around the small table. Garfield, the red-haired terrier of a commander of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s Third Brigade took a sip from the coffee mug he had brought in with him. He hadn’t offered any to the other two men, Colonel Aikens from First Infantry Division, and Lieutenant Colonel Carswell from MACV,

“Here’s the deal,” Garfield explained curtly. “The sniper team came across a ton of money out there in the Michelin, maybe a couple million dollars in American and South Vietnamese currency.”

“MPCs?” Aikens asked with a puzzled frown.

“No,” Garfield barked impatiently, “greenbacks. Don’t know where the fuck they came from. Hell, might be counterfeit, for all I know. Doesn’t matter. I’m guessing the gooks planned to use the money to bribe local officials and buy supplies for their next offensive. Anyway, our guys got the money and took out a couple VC. Then we lost comms with them.”

“Well, what are they going to do with the money?” Aikens asked. “The

snipers.”

“We told them to take it back to the rendezvous point where we dropped them off, but we’re not sure they got the message. They were supposed to be there this morning, but they didn’t show. We haven’t been able to reach them since.”

“You think they’ve been killed or captured?”

Garfield shrugged. “Don’t know what to think. The intel guys tell me the gooks are talking on the radio, pissed as hell, so I guess they’re still in the wind. But we don’t know exactly where. If it was up to me, I would have told them to just burn the money, but Saigon says we’ve got to recover it.”

“Sir,” Banning spoke up, “Those guys seemed to be pretty competent. They’re probably just trying to make their way back without running into any enemy forces. Can we send some units in to look for them?”

Garfield scowled at Banning for interrupting. “If I had the units, I would, but we’ve got a big sweep going on in the Crescent that takes priority. Aikens, you got anybody?”

“We’ve had serious contact in the Iron Triangle and Trapezoid,” Aikens responded apologetically. “I could maybe spare a couple platoons.”

Carswell spoke up for the first time. “Colonel, I’ve got an ARVN mechanized company that’s been op-conned to our province chief, and right now they’re just sitting in garrison. I could have them sent in to search.”

Garfield winced. “ARVNs,” he said disparagingly, then sighed. “Better than nothing, I guess. All right. Banning, show him where they snipers were last located. Any questions?”

Before anyone could reply, Garfield shoved his chair back and stormed out of the room. Banning had wanted to ask if the ARVNs should be told about the money or not, but didn’t get the chance. He decided that would have to be Carswell’s call, anyway.

# NINE

Nash awoke with a start, feeling a hot spot on his cheek like someone had pushed a lit cigarette into his face. He brought his hand up and felt around, but there was no damage, and as he came fully awake and opened his eyes, he realized a beam of sunlight had found its way through the overhead canopy and warmed his skin. The irregular circle of light was now on his chest and moving slowly down his body. Nash sat up and looked around, trying to orient himself now that it was daytime. The team had found this small clearing just before dawn, unloaded Trey and the packs, and set up a hasty perimeter. Trey, pointing out that he had slept on the cart, offered to take first watch, standing guard while the others stretched out on the ground to get much needed rest.

It had taken Nash a while to get to sleep. He was still wired by all the activity, and worried about their safety. Mostly, however, he thought about the killing. In the morning he had killed that VC at the storage tank, and in the evening he had killed five NVA at the old garage. Until now he had not had enough time to even think about it, but suddenly the deaths all appeared front and center in his mind. He had ended the life of six men, all in one long day, and he couldn't figure out how he felt about that. He knew he should feel remorse, and he tried to summon up some tears or other physical manifestation of some emotion, but failed. Those men were the enemy, and he had been trained to shoot them, so that is what he had done.

When he had gone hunting with his dad, it had been different, but then again, maybe not. He had especially enjoyed the actual hunt, the traipsing through the woods early in the morning, breathing the sharp mountain air and listening to the crunch of leaves under his feet, searching through the slanted sunbeams for signs of deer or elk. When he found one, he had taken pleasure in the process of aiming and firing the rifle, but had felt a pang of sorrow when the animal had fallen. But, as he reminded himself, he only killed them for the food they would provide, and in some way he had honored them by consuming them. It occurred to him that the only other animals he shot, the ones he and his family didn't eat, were the predators that roamed the

mountains and presented a threat to Nash, like bears and wolves. He felt no regret when he killed them, for if he hadn't, they would have probably attacked and done the same to him. Perhaps that was how he felt about the VC and NVA he had shot, he told himself. They, too, were predators who would not think twice about slaying Nash, and shooting them was simple self-preservation. Nash found comfort in that logic, and avoided parsing it, which allowed him to finally doze off.

Now Nash looked at his watch, and saw it was already past noon. Trey should have awakened him long before now. He saw Trey sitting with his back to one of the cart wheels, his body limp but his eyes alert, and Trey greeted him with a nod and a limply raised hand. "Morning, sunshine," Trey croaked.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Nash demanded, rubbing his eyes.

"You needed your beauty sleep," Trey responded, "and I was awake anyhow."

Nash stood up and stretched. Harv and Quan were still asleep, with Harv on his back gently snoring, and Quan curled up in a ball on his side. "Where's Tony?" Nash asked worriedly.

"Went to take a dump, I think."

Nash walked over and looked down at Trey, whose skin was taking on the color of bleached mahogany. "You look like shit, man," Nash told him honestly.

"You're no prize yourself," Trey rejoined, managing half a smile.

"No, seriously. How're you feeling?"

"Like I've been run over by a bus, how do you think I'm feeling? Man, there is no part of me that doesn't hurt."

"We need to change your bandages." Nash thought about that, and figured they only had a couple field dressings left. And no sulfa powder or other antibiotics. He really needed to get Trey to a medic soon.

A rustle of bushes announced the return of Tony, who pushed through into the clearing carrying only his M-16, having left his pistol belt behind. "Glad to see you're awake," he said to Nash. "I scouted the area, and didn't see or hear anything, so we're okay for now."

“Good. Wake up those two, we’ve got to get our shit together.”

While Tony nudged Quan and Harv, Nash picked up the pistol belt he had laid down beside him while he slept and retrieved the field dressing from its canvas pouch. “Who else has dressings?” he asked. He knew Quan had used his and Trey’s on Jefferson last night, and Tony said he had used his on his own wound, but Harv produced his and handed it to Nash. Nash went over to the cart to get the poncho that had covered their packs, now draped over a table leg, and spread it on the ground next to Trey.

“Take off your shirt, pull down your pants, and roll over onto the poncho,” Nash ordered.

“Don’t I even get a kiss first?” Trey joked weakly, but did as he was told. His bandages were nearly black with dried blood, thoroughly soaked and oozing around the edges. Nash was glad Trey couldn’t see them, because they nauseated Nash. The field dressing hadn’t been big enough to cover all the small wounds in Trey’s back, but those left uncovered had partly scabbed over, and were no longer bleeding. Nash used his pocket knife to cut the gauze strips holding the dressing on Trey’s back and gently lifted it away. It was partially stuck to Trey’s skin, and the sergeant muffled a groan as it pulled at his skin.

“Sorry,” Nash apologized as he set the bloody bandage aside. The wounds underneath were ragged and swollen, and fresh blood seeped out from where the gauze pad had been stuck. Nash got his canteen and gently poured water over the area. Harv came over and handed Nash a pack of C-ration toilet paper he had just opened, which Nash used to gently dab at the wounds and clean away the dried blood. Trey, his face buried in his elbow, just moaned and whimpered. Nash opened his field dressing and re-covered the larger wounds, reaching under Trey to pull the ends of the gauze tie strips around his stomach so he could knot them at his side.

“I’ve got some Band-Aids,” Harv said, holding out three of the slim paper-wrapped bandages like one would use on a child’s skinned knee.

“Better than nothing,” Nash said, taking them and applying them to the smaller wounds on Trey’s back. Next, however, was Trey’s thigh wound, which he knew was a much worse proposition. Cutting the bands with his pocket knife, he pulled the surprisingly heavy bandage away, and it came without sticking. That was because the blood was still wet there, and oozing

constantly even now. Again Nash flooded the wound with water and dabbed away the excess, but it didn't stop the bleeding. Tony handed him a fresh field dressing, and Nash pressed it down and tied it off as tightly as he could, hoping it would apply enough pressure to at least slow down the bleeding.

"There you go," Nash told Trey with false cheerfulness, "good as new."

"Thanks," Trey wheezed, struggling to rise. Nash and Tony helped him stand up while Quan pulled Trey's pants back up and buttoned them. Harv then helped Trey put his shirt back on. Both his pants and shirt were soaked with blood, but there was nothing to be done about that for now. Nash was worried, nonetheless, that the wounds were getting infected. He wished they had brought at least a few medical supplies, but they hadn't, probably because no one believed they would get hurt. They'd know better next time, if there was a next time.

Nash told the others to get some breakfast—or lunch, since it was almost noon—and made sure Trey got plenty to eat and drank lots of water. The clearing they were in was surrounded by bushes and saplings, so they were well hidden from the open areas of the plantation around them, but while this gave them concealment, it didn't provide cover, protection from enemy fire. That was the problem with the Michelin—it was mostly flat land stretched for miles, and the only way to find real cover was to dig a hole. But for now, at least, they were out of sight. Nash was pleasantly surprised when Quan shinnied up a small rubber tree that grew at the edge of the clearing until he could see over the tops of the bushes and peered around in all directions before sliding back down and shaking his head.

While he was spooning up some of the LRRP rations that Tony had prepared, Nash realized that his rifle had the ART scope on it in place of the starlight, and didn't remember changing it over. Setting down his canteen cup, he picked up the rifle and examined the scope, to ensure it was mounted properly. Then he looked up at Trey, who was sitting awkwardly on one of the cart's tires to avoid pressure on his thigh. Trey gave him a strained grin and shrugged.

"Had to do something while you guys were goofing off," Trey said. Reaching over he touched his own rifle, lying on the empty cart, to show that he had switched scopes on it as well.

"Thanks," Nash said, studying Trey to look for any signs of further

deterioration. “Eat your breakfast,” he ordered, kindly but firmly. Trey nodded and picked up his canteen cup.

“What’s our next move?” Nash asked, looking at Trey but glancing at the others to bring them into the discussion. Trey was still the team leader, and it would have to be his decision, but Nash wanted everyone’s input. “Stay here till dark, or keep heading toward Dau Tieng?”

Trey pursed his lips as he thought about it, and then finally said, “Well, if they were able to follow our tracks, they’d be here by now, so I guess they don’t know where we are.”

“But they’ll be looking for us,” Harv said, “that’s for damn sure.”

“And if they find us here,” Trey continued, “we have no good cover, unless we use Harv’s little shovel for several hours. And we’d still be trapped.”

“True,” Nash offered, “but if we move in daylight, they’re more likely to see us. On the other hand, we need to get you to the medics, the sooner the better.”

“I vote for moving on now,” Tony said, scraping the last dregs of food from his canteen cup. “I want to get back to base camp so I can get some real food.”

“What do you think, Quan?” Nash asked. Quan was squatting down and nibbling on a rice ball. He looked at the cart, and then at the other men.

“Moving target hard to hit,” he pointed out.

Nash laughed. Quan had gotten right to the point and made the decision obvious.

“Bet that,” Trey said. “Let’s saddle up.” While the others put on their gear and loaded the packs onto the cart, Trey pulled out his map and studied it, occasionally referring to his compass.

“Know where we are?” Nash asked him as he threw his pack on the cart.

“Somewhere in the Michelin,” Trey answered, “as near as I can tell.”

“Well, that’s a big help.”

“Seriously,” Trey said, pointing to a spot on the map, “I think we’re somewhere around here. Maybe twenty clicks from Dau Tieng.”

Nash thought about it. "If we travel all night, we could be there by morning."

"Yeah, it'd be better to approach the base camp during the daylight, to avoid being shot by our own guys."

"What about that mech unit?" Harv asked as he loaded his own pack. "Shouldn't we go to where we were supposed to meet them?"

"I'm not sure I can find that spot again," Trey explained, "and I don't know what day or time they're going to be there for sure. Originally it was two days from now, but they changed that on the radio, it sounded like. We just don't know to what."

"What about the radio?" Nash asked. They had brought it on the cart, but no one had looked at since they left the garage. Harv now picked it up and examined it in the daylight. The case had a couple small holes in it, and the tuning knob on top was smashed. He poked his finger in one of the holes, and messed with the knobs on top, then shook his head.

"It's a no-go," Harv announced. "FUBAR." Fucked up beyond all recognition.

"Take it with us, or leave it here?" Nash asked.

"Who's signed for it?" Tony said. Every piece of equipment in the Army had to be signed for, and when it was lost or damaged, the signer was responsible for the cost of repair or replacement, at least in theory.

"I guess I am," Trey said.

"Combat loss," Harv suggested. This was the loophole to the accountability problem that was widely used in Viet Nam. Lost or damaged equipment could be written off as a combat loss, thus relieving the person who signed for it of any monetary responsibility.

"It definitely is," Trey agreed. "Pitch it."

Harv threw the radio under a bush.

Once Trey had been helped onto the pile of backpacks and everyone was ready, they waited while Quan slipped out through the bushes, AK-47 in hand, and reconned the area. Meanwhile Nash and Harv switched places on the cart, so Harv could carry his M-79 locked and loaded in his right hand. This left Nash holding a table leg in his right hand, his rifle lying on the cart

next to Trey. He unsnapped the holster of his .45, in case he needed to make a quick-draw.

When Quan returned with a positive nod, they made their way out of the clearing and through the bushes to the more open part of the plantation. Quan was now on point, and Tony brought up the rear, hanging back about twenty yards and often walking backwards to look for anyone that might be following them. Trey held the map and compass, and gave occasional course corrections. Nash was glad they were on the move, for at least they were doing something, even if it was the wrong thing.

“We should be coming to a road up ahead,” Trey told them, about half an hour after they had left the clearing.

Nash squinted his eyes as he looked into the distance, trying to see if he could detect any sign of the road. Instead, he saw Quan suddenly stop, then dart over to take cover behind a rubber tree. Quan’s anxious look back at Nash told him all he needed to know. “Over there,” he told Harv, nodding toward a nearby tree and pushing against the cart. They hurriedly dragged the cart over to a position next to the tree and let the rear of the cart down to rest on the ground. While he grabbed his rifle, Nash waved at Tony to take cover as well.

“What is it?” Trey demanded, picking up his rifle and peering over the raised front of the cart.

“Don’t know,” Nash told him as he went prone beside the cart and lowered the legs of his bipod. “Quan saw something.”

Quan suddenly appeared next to him, having run back along the line of trees to avoid being seen. “NVA,” he whispered, pointing to their front. “I see three.”

Nash looked through his scope, slowly sweeping the area in front of him. “Where?” he asked.

“I see ‘em,” Harv said in a hoarse whisper. Harv was on the other side of this line of trees, looking at something that Nash couldn’t see. “They’re just standing around, smokin’ and jokin’.”

“They’re probably looking for us,” Trey said grimly. He shifted on the cart and brought his rifle to bear down the right side of the line of trees, nearly causing the cart to suddenly tilt forward. Harv stabilized the cart, and

Trey peered through his scope, adjusting the reticle. “Yep,” he said quietly, “three of them, all with AKs, about 500 yards out.”

The cart was too big to effectively hide behind a tree, and Nash was worried that the enemy soldiers might really take a hard look down the lane and see it. “What do we do?” he asked. “Wait for them to move on?”

“Yeah,” Trey said with little confidence, “and hope they don’t move this way.”

Nash knew that retreating wasn’t a very good option either. Their movement would likely draw the soldiers’ attention, certainly more so than a stable object. At this distance, the cart could conceivably be mistaken for an ordinary piece of plantation equipment left abandoned by rubber workers.

“What if they’re outpostting?” Harv asked. By that he meant they were perhaps a stationary patrol, posted there to observe and block anyone moving through the area. If so, they would be there until they were relieved, and might be joined by more troops. And Nash considered that to be the most likely explanation for their presence. If so, the sniper team would have to wait until nightfall, still several hours away, before they could fall back.

“One of them’s moving left,” Trey noted quietly.

Nash saw the man enter his field of vision, having walked into the next lane of trees, where he turned and walked a few meters toward them, and then stopped. Pushing down the top of his pants, he began urinating, his AK-47 slung over his shoulder, and his head idly surveying his surroundings. Nash reached up and focused his scope on the man’s chest, not intending to shoot, but just to be sure he had the range correct. Apparently that slight movement caught the man’s eyes, for he quickly pulled his pants up and tilted his face forward, squinting in Nash’s direction.

“I’ve been spotted,” Nash whispered. “I’ll have to take him out.”

“Roger,” Trey whispered back.

Nash took a deep breath, exhaled half of it, and then held it. Through the scope he saw the man begin to let the AK slide off his shoulder into his hands, and his mouth open to shout to his buddies. Nash couldn’t let that happen. He squeezed the trigger and felt the rifle recoil against his shoulder, ignoring the sound of the shot and the working of the bolt mechanism. He just concentrated on maintaining his sight picture, and after a split second that

seemed to take forever, the man jerked, turned halfway around, and fell face first into the leaves on the ground.

Above him Nash heard Trey's rifle bark a second later, and then a second shot and a curse.

Nash thought Trey must have gotten both the men in the other lane, and kept his sight on his fallen target, in case the man wasn't fully incapacitated. Then Trey spoke urgently.

"One's coming your way."

Nash looked up over the sight to expand his field of vision, and saw an NVA soldier running south, from Nash's right to left. Quickly he put his eye back to the scope and swung the rifle, trying to capture the running man in his sight. The scenery blurred as he sought out the figure, and finally he came into view. Hurriedly Nash pulled the trigger, mentally chastising himself in the process for having jerked it, and saw the man stumble, but keep running. Before Nash could pull the trigger again, the man disappeared behind the line of rubber trees.

"Did you get him?" Trey asked anxiously, trying to roll over so he could see.

"Maybe nicked him," Nash replied with disappointment. "He's still running."

"Shit! My first shot went high, and I had to shoot again to take down the first guy. By then the second one was on the move." Trey had rolled over onto his wounded thigh; Nash could see the wince of pain on Trey's face as the young man leaned over the edge of the cart to talk to him.

"We gotta move!" Nash said, scrambling to his feet.

"Which way?" Tony asked, his head darting left and right as he sought any sign of other enemy soldiers. He had run up to the cart when the shooting started.

Nash made a snap decision. "North! Quan, take point." He put his rifle on the cart and grabbed the table leg. Trey had rolled back over onto his back, but raised his head to look at Nash.

"Why not keep going west?" he asked. "The gooks aren't blocking us now."

Nash searched for an answer, but somehow he just knew he was right. Finally he temporized. “Uh, that one gook headed south on the run. There’s probably more gooks just down the road. We can’t risk running into them just as we reach that road.” He wasn’t sure that was true, but it felt right. And going north kept more lines of trees between them and any pursuit. They could turn back west later, whenever it felt safe.

With no further discussion, Harv and Nash turned the cart to the right and started pulling it north, as Quan ran ahead and Tony fell in behind. As Quan had pointed out before, a moving target was harder to hit.

Around three o’clock the rain returned, this time with a vengeance. A torrential downpour made a terrific racket and soaked them to the skin, despite their ponchos. The team pushed on through the rubber, roughly paralleling the road to their west, unable to see more than a hundred yards due to the darkened skies and moisture in the air. His feet slipping on the wet leaves as he pulled the cart along, Nash rationalized that the rain was actually all to the good, since it made it harder for the NVA to see or hear them. But it certainly made their life miserable. Every fifteen or twenty minutes Nash would send Quan or Tony over toward the road to see if it looked safe to turn west, but each time they returned with bad news. Either they saw patrols, or saw recent tracks in the mud, indicating the NVA were still watching for them.

Nash hated going the wrong way, but couldn’t risk crossing that road with the cart unless it was definitely clear of enemy activity. He was certain the one man who had escaped had quickly found his comrades and reported the shootings, and those men were now after them. The question was, had the team left any evidence of the direction they had taken, and would the enemy be able to follow them, especially in the rain. Nash had initially tried zig-zagging from one lane of trees to another, but once the rain started, he gave up on that for fear of getting too far off track.

Late in the afternoon the rain had eased to a steady drizzle, and Nash was starting to drag, worn out by the tension, the rain, and the effort of pulling the heavy cart. They came to a small stand of bushes, so Nash pulled the cart over on the east side, away from the road, and he and Harv lowered the back of the cart to the ground. While they rested and checked on Trey,

Nash sent Quan out to the road to see what he could find.

“I’m wet,” Trey complained. He was lying on his left side, clutching his rifle to his chest, and shivering. His face looked ashen.

“Are you cold?” Nash asked, trying to keep the concern out of his voice.

“Naw, just wet,” Trey responded with a quivering voice. “Don’t know why I’m shaking like this.”

“Well, don’t do it then,” Nash chided him with a smile. “It makes me nervous.”

“Makes *you* nervous? How about me?”

“Maybe you’ve got rackets,” Harv suggested.

“Rackets?” Trey said with a puzzled frown. “You mean rickets?”

“No, rackets,” Harv grinned. “It’s the tennis disease.”

Trey groaned. “Not funny, Harv.”

Quan ran up, alarm on his face. “Soldiers!” he told Nash, pointing toward the north.

“How many?”

“Three,” Quan answered. “One kilometer.”

Nash turned to Harv and Tony. “You guys stay here. I’m going to go check it out.” Getting his rifle from the cart, he nodded to Quan to lead the way. Dodging from tree to tree, they made their way to the edge of the dirt road, now covered by a slick coating of red mud. Nash put his back against a rubber tree, being careful not to dislodge the pottery collection bowl, and then peered around it, looking first to the south, and then to the north. The road to the south was empty, and the mud had not been recently disturbed. To the north he could just make out the figures that Quan had reported.

Nash knelt down behind the tree and raised his rifle to his shoulder, removing the lens caps from the scope as he did so. He discovered that from this angle he couldn’t see the distant men, but he didn’t want to move closer to the road and reveal himself. Quan, crouching beside him, understood his dilemma and pointed to a six-foot log lying between this tree and the next, one end of which was almost to the edge of the road. Nash nodded. Keeping the next tree between him and the soldiers, he crept forward, then went to his

stomach and low-crawled to the log, his rifle cross-ways on top of his forearms. When he reached the east end of the log, he scooted to his left until he was nearly at the west end of the log, then peeked over the top, right where the stump of an old limb jutted up. He felt Quan join him.

Slowly he brought his rifle up over the top of the log, right at the fork of the limb remnant, and pointed it down the road, raising his head just enough to peer through the scope. He maneuvered the rifle around until the three figures were centered in the sight, using his right hand to adjust the focus. It was three Vietnamese, all wearing olive drab ponchos and American-style helmet liners, minus the steel pots that normally fit over the light-weight liners. All three were carrying American M-2 carbines, and one of them had a large square lump under the back of his poncho, apparently a radio.

“ARVNs?” Nash wondered aloud. “Out here?” He passed the rifle to Quan, indicating he should look through the scope. Quan took it nervously, leaning his AK against the log, and hesitantly raised the scope to his eye. He looked for a few seconds, and then hastily returned the rifle to Nash.

“South Vietnamese,” Quan confirmed.

Nash chewed on his lower lip while he pondered his next move. First he considered the possibility that they were VC simply dressed as ARVNs, but quickly dismissed that idea as too unlikely. Next he wondered what they were doing out here in the rubber in the first place, since ARVNs weren’t known for voluntarily going into danger, but then came up with lots of plausible reasons. Mentally he regretted his doubts of their bravery, based solely on the prevailing opinion of most GIs. Finally, and most importantly, he thought about how to reveal himself to them without causing a friendly fire incident or alerting any NVA who might be in the area. They were still pretty far away, so he had some time to decide.

Observing the three men in his scope as they approached slowly down the road, Nash had to admit they were operating with good tactical discipline. They were spread out, alert, and moved with a steady deliberation, actually operating better than most US infantry units. That gave Nash more confidence and trust in the soldiers, and pushed away his previous doubts about them. When they were about 300 meters away, he raised his left hand and waved it slowly back and forth.

“Hello!” he yelled. “American.” With that he unhurriedly stood up,

holding his rifle vertically out from his side, and his left hand up, palm out.

His shout had brought the men to a crouching halt, their guns pointed in his direction, but they partially relaxed when he faced them in such an open manner. Beside him, Quan stood up the same way, holding his AK to the side, and Quan called out something in Vietnamese. One of the soldiers replied with what sounded like a semi-friendly greeting, and the three men quickly walked up to stand just across the log from Nash. One of the men had sergeant stripes painted on his helmet liner, and his body language made it clear he was the man in charge. The sergeant looked admiringly at Nash's sniper rifle, with its complex telescopic sight and suppressor, and briefly frowned at the sight of Quan's AK-47. He barked a question at Quan, and Quan answered it subserviently.

"He says it wrong for me to have AK," Quan told Nash, looking down.

"Tough shit," Nash told him, and then brought his rifle back in to a port arms position across his chest and faced the sergeant.

"Do you speak English?" he asked.

"Ti-ti," the man replied, with the one of the few Vietnamese phrases Nash understood, one that meant "very little." Nash looked questioningly at the other two men, who returned his gaze with blank looks of nonunderstanding. Taking a dark blue scarf out from under his poncho to wipe his face, the sergeant then spoke in rapid-fire Vietnamese to Quan, who struggled to keep up while he translated.

"He say he look for us. Everybody look for us. We very lucky he find us. Now we be safe. He ask, where are other men?"

"Back there," Nash said to the sergeant, jerking his head in a vague motion to the right rear.

The sergeant said something else to Quan, draped the scarf around his neck, and then turned to the man with the radio and demanded the handset.

"He call his captain," Quan explained.

The man began calling on the radio, and as he did so he wandered away from Nash, pulling on the mike cord to make the radioman follow him. The other man was left to wait with Nash and Quan, nodding and smiling.

Quan smiled back at the man, while saying to Nash, "Something

wrong.”

“What?” Nash asked, gripping his rifle more tightly.

“Something,” Quan repeated, without clarifying.

Nash watched the sergeant, and noticed the change in his posture as he listened to the instructions coming through on the radio. He seemed to stand more erect, and kept glancing back at Nash, and at the area behind Nash. Nash looked back and saw Harv and Tony approaching, obviously coming to see what was going on. He would have preferred they stay with Trey and the cart, which was barely visible behind the foliage.

The sergeant finished his conversation on the radio, and then leaned over and whispered something to the radio operator, whose face immediately clouded. Together they returned to the log, with the sergeant smiling like an alligator. “Hello, GI!” he said ebulliently to Harv and Tony as they came up and stood on either side of Nash and Quan. Then he spoke in Vietnamese, directing his question at Nash, but obviously expecting Quan to translate.

“He say captain ask if money safe,” Quan said, giving Nash a quizzical look. A torrent of questions suddenly beset Nash—how did they know about the money, why is that important to them, and how should he answer the question? Before he could resolve the issue in his mind, it was too late. All three ARVNs were holding their carbines at waist level, pointed at Nash and the others. The radioman held his light-weight carbine one-handed, holding the radio handset to his ear with his left hand.

“Put your weapons down!” the sergeant screamed at them in good English, his face twisted with hate. He jerked his rifle barrel up and down to emphasize the urgency of his command. The radioman mirrored the sergeant’s grimness, but his eyes seemed to be filled more with greed than hate. The third man, unsure of what was going on, was ready to follow his sergeant’s lead regardless.

In his mind Nash rapidly considered his options, wondering if he could bring his rifle up and fire it in time, or use it as a stave to knock the sergeant’s gun away, but he quickly dismissed such notions. The ARVNs were just far enough away that he couldn’t reach them, and they could easily fire before he could bring his own rifle to bear. Bowing to the inevitable, he slowly lowered the rifle and laid it across the log. Quan, Tony, and Harv, seeing his surrender, did the same.

“What now?” Nash snarled at the sergeant.

“You will show us where the money is,” the sergeant said with an evil smile.

“And then what?”

The sergeant shrugged. “We will let you return to your mission. We will deliver the money to the authorities. Everybody happy. Is the money on that car?” The sergeant nodded toward the cart, and Nash suppressed the urge to correct the sergeant’s English.

“No,” Nash told him, “We hid it.” He wasn’t sure why he lied, but Nash had a strong hunch the sergeant had other plans in mind than those he had just expressed. Under his poncho, Nash quietly unsnapped the holster and gripped the butt of his .45 pistol.

The sergeant shook his head slowly. “I do not think so. Let us go look.” Motioning with his rifle, he urged the sniper team to turn around and walk back toward the cart. They had gone only a few steps when Nash stopped and turned back to face the ARVNs.

“I can’t leave my rifle on the ground there,” he protested. “I’ll need it.” He had seen the glint of the scope at the edge of the cart, and knew—or at least hoped—that Trey was ready.

“We can get it later,” the sergeant said, and Nash could tell he was lying. He heard the click as the sergeant took his carbine off safe.

“We’ll give you the money,” Nash told him, waving his left arm to fluff out his poncho and disguise the fact he had drawn the pistol. “But we’ve gotta have our guns.”

“You won’t need them,” the sergeant growled, and Nash saw his eyes tighten. He was going to shoot, there was no doubt in Nash’s mind. Nash was so concentrated on the sergeant he was caught entirely surprised by the blast of the radioman’s carbine to his right, and he reacted without thinking. Aiming strictly by instinct, Nash fired the forty-five, his poncho puffing out in front of him as the bullet pierced it and slammed into the stomach of the sergeant. The man’s eyes widened in surprise as he stumbled backwards and fell to the ground, his carbine dropping barrel first into the wet leaves.

Nash heard the bark of an XM-21 behind him, and the radioman’s head exploded in a cloud of red, white, and yellow particles that sent his helmet

liner flying up in the air. Nash immediately turned to face the third man, who stood there frozen with fear, his eyes wide and his mouth gaping. Nash gave him a second to surrender, but only a second. Pulling his forty-five out from under his poncho, Nash raised it and aimed at the man's head, hoping the man would drop his carbine so Nash wouldn't have to kill him.

Trey fired again, and a hole appeared in the front of the third man's poncho, centered on his chest. The man gave a grunt, then closed his eyes and sat down, paused, and fell over. Nash kept his pistol trained on the man, looking for any sign of movement, but knew he was dead. The shoot-out had taken only a few seconds, and Nash was still trying to replay it in his head to understand what had just happened, when he heard the gurgle from Tony and the gasps from Quan and Harv.

Spinning around, Nash saw Tony on his back, one knee drawn up, and his hands clutching his chest. Blood seeped between his fingers and spotted his chin as he lay there wheezing in short wet breaths. His eyes looked straight up, unseeing.

Harv rushed over and knelt beside Tony, crying "Sucking chest wound! Oh, God, what do I do?" His hands fluttered over Tony's body. Training on how to treat a sucking chest wound was an integral part of Army first aid, but it was one of those things that you didn't think you would ever see, so you didn't really pay that much attention. Nash dropped down beside Harv as he racked his brain for the answers.

"Cover the hole," Nash said, as the drill sergeant's words came back to him. "With plastic, like the field dressing cover."

"We're out of field dressings," Harv whimpered.

"Well, use his poncho."

"Right," Harv said, gaining a little self-control. He pried Tony's hands away from his chest and used the palm of his own hand to press the plastic poncho down against Tony's heaving ribcage. Tony groaned and burbled, his hands waving weakly in the air, and then fell silent. His arms dropped limply to his side, and a reddish bubble of saliva formed over his gaping mouth before popping with a whistle of escaping air. Harv kept pressing on his chest.

"Help him!" Harv begged.

Nash put his hand on Harv's forearm and tugged gently at it. "He's gone," he told him.

"What?"

"He didn't make it, Harv. You can let up now."

Albertson stared at Tony's face, and Nash could see the tears in Harv's eyes. Finally Harv let go and fell backwards onto his butt, holding his bloody hands out from his body.

"But. . . I . . . he was. . ." Harv stuttered.

Quan stepped across the log and went to the body of the sergeant. He kicked the dead man in the side, harder than necessary to just ensure his demise, and then pulled the blue scarf from the man's neck. Stepping back across the log, he held the scarf out to Harv. Staring blankly at the proffered cloth, Harv didn't reach out for it until Quan softly said, "Your hands." Harv looked at his hands, covered in Tony's blood, and nodded. He took the scarf and began wiping, scrubbing them and rubbing them to remove any trace.

"What about the radio?" Trey called from the cart.

Nash stood up and nodded. They didn't have time to mourn; they needed to find a safe haven, and quickly. It was obvious that at least some of the ARVNs were out to find them and take the money, and apparently did not intend to leave any witnesses. They knew the ARVN radio worked, so they could use it to contact their own headquarters.

Nash crossed over the log and rolled the radioman's body over onto its stomach, then lifted the poncho and used it to cover the mess that remained of its head. The radio appeared to be intact. Roughly he pulled the radio off the body and dragged it over to the log, trailing the coiled cord of the handset behind him. Only after he had set the radio down and pulled at the cord did he see that the handset was a shattered bloody mess. Trey's rifle shot had gone through the handset before bursting the man's head open. Now Nash regretted dumping the remains of their own radio, and briefly considered going back to look for it, so they could salvage the handset, but wasn't sure they could even find it again.

Harv stood up, threw the scarf on the ground, and came over to sit on the log next to the radio. "What about Tony?" he asked plaintively.

"Get his dog tags," Nash said. "I'll do it," he amended, seeing how

devastated Harv was by Tony's death. "Uh, see if the ARVNs have anything we can use."

While Harv searched the dead Vietnamese, Nash pulled Tony's dog tags and remembered what he had been told about how to collect them. He was supposed to keep one of the tags, and then jam the other between the corpse's front teeth, for identification later when the body was picked up by Graves Registration. Slipping one of the tags into his pants pocket, he held the other one above Tony's face for a moment before shaking his head. The official process was just too grisly. Instead he dropped the tag into Tony's mouth and gently pushed his jaw closed. Then he removed Tony's pistol belt and patted down all the pockets of his uniform. Tony still had several packets of cash on him, and Nash put them in a small stack by the body. He also had a letter. It appeared to be from his mother, and had been opened and read. Nash wondered why Tony had kept the letter; perhaps it had said something important to him. Nash pocketed the water-spotted envelope, planning to turn it in to someone later.

# TEN

Nash used an old tree branch to spread leaves over the hump of fresh dirt that covered Tony's body, while Harv carved Tony's name in the bark of the nearest rubber tree with his bayonet. Quan was out by the road, watching for anyone who might be approaching. Nash had suggested that Quan could use one of the ARVN M-2 carbines, but the Chieu Hoi had preferred to keep using the AK-47, with which he was more familiar. Trey was still lying on the cart; he had offered to come help, but he was so obviously weak that Nash had insisted he would be more use standing guard from the cart. Nash was glad Harv had brought his entrenching tool, since it would have been almost impossible to bury Mazzola without it, and if they hadn't buried him, Nash felt sure Harv would have insisted that they take the body with them, a seriously impractical proposition.

The ARVN radio was a mixed blessing. Harv had disconnected the useless handset and turned on the internal speaker, so they could monitor the radio traffic, but not transmit. Quan had put the radio on his back and was listening to the occasional broadcasts of the ARVN unit to which the dead men had belonged, to see what they were going to do. When Albertson finished the grave marking, Nash handed him the entrenching tool and picked up his rifle. Whistling and waving at Quan to come in, he and Harv trudged solemnly back to the cart. When Quan caught up with them, he tapped the radio over his shoulder with his left hand and told them what he had heard.

"Captain mad sergeant not answer. Maybe he think sergeant steal money. He send tank here to find them."

Nash doubted the ARVN unit had tanks, but they probably did have armored personnel carriers, and that might be what Quan meant. Regardless, a tracked vehicle could be here fairly quickly, and they would be virtually defenseless against it.

"We need to move," Nash announced. "Get across the road, head west, and then veer south to Dau Tieng. What do you think, Trey?"

Jefferson lifted his head from the packs he was lying on and nodded.

“Don’t want to be here when either the ARVNs or the NVA come. Everybody’s pissed at us now.” His voice creaked, and he was barely audible. Nash was becoming more and more concerned about Trey’s condition. Trey eyed the stacks of money Nash had removed from Tony, now jumbled on the edge of the cart. “What’s that?” he asked. “A bribe?”

“What Tony was carrying. Didn’t want to leave it for the gooks to find. I’ll put it in one of the gook backpacks.” Reaching around Trey, Nash pulled one of the packs free and unstrapped the top. As he dropped the stacks of cash into the bag, he said, “I think I’ll put the ones I’m carrying in here, too. With the cart, we don’t need to carry it on us.”

“Yeah,” Trey agreed, reaching for his own pockets. “Damn things are uncomfortable.”

Seeing Nash and Trey emptying their pockets, Harv and Quan did the same, tossing the bundles of cash into the backpack. Trey redid the straps and put it at the end of the cart. “It’ll make a good pillow,” he suggested, laying his head on it.

Moving over to the left side of the cart, Nash laid his rifle on the packs and grabbed the table leg, waiting while Harv positioned himself on the other side. “Quan, you lead the way. Trey, you’ll have to keep an eye on our rear. Let’s go.”

Once again they were on their way to an unknown destination, making themselves a moving target instead of a stationary one. They left behind Tony’s grave, and the three shrouded bodies of the ARVNs. Harv’s search of the bodies had found nothing useful, and Nash had utilized the dead men’s own ponchos to cover the bodies, with their weapons lying on the edge of the rubberized sheets to hold them in place. Nash hoped that treating the bodies respectfully, despite their criminality, might buy them some time or mercy, should the ARVNs catch up with them again.

The rain resumed, although not as hard as it had been earlier, and the dimness of the plantation thickened. Nash had them bear slightly southwest by moving down an east-west row of trees for only a few hundred meters before changing lanes to the left and continuing down the adjacent row. They had been traveling for over an hour when Quan stopped and waited for the cart to catch up with him while he listened intently to the radio, its volume turned down to the lowest setting possible.

“They find bodies,” Quan reported between transmissions, cocking his head as he listened. “Captain blame us. He say we American criminals.”

“Takes one to know one,” Harv commented.

“I wonder how many of the ARVNs know about the money,” Nash mused.

“Just the captain, is my guess,” Trey said. Although he looked exhausted to Nash, his voice had regained some of its strength.

“That sergeant knew,” Harv pointed out, “and the RTO.”

“Yeah,” Nash agreed, “but that third guy acted like he had no clue. That captain probably wants all the money for himself, so he’s not going to tell anyone else about it unless he just has to.”

“They now argue about which way we go,” Quan interrupted. “Some people worry about night soon.”

Neither the ARVNs nor the Americans wanted to be in the rubber after dark, Nash knew. He didn’t know where the ARVNs were based, but even if they were mechanized, it would take them a while to get out of the rubber and back to their encampment. He checked his watch, and figured nightfall was less than an hour away.

“They go to base camp now,” Quan told them. “Come back tomorrow.”

“Good,” Nash said. “Now if the commies would do the same, we’d be set.”

“Like that’ll happen,” Trey grumbled.

Reaching into the cargo pocket of his pants, Nash withdrew the plastic-covered map and squinted at it. The light was dim, and the plastic was splattered with drops of water, making the pale green and brown markings difficult to make out. If he was right about where they were—and he had serious doubts about that—they would soon come to the edge of the plantation. He put the map back in his pocket.

Nash rotated his arms to work the kinks out, and then took ahold of the table leg again. “Head ‘em up, move ‘em out,” he said.

“Rawhide,” Harv half sang in response. Quan trotted ahead, his AK held at the ready. Nash and Harv brought the cart level and pulled it forward.

It was dusk, and the light was failing rapidly now. Once again, the rain had stopped, but there was still enough moisture in the air to make it almost seem foggy. The rubber trees in this area seemed smaller, but Nash wasn't sure if they truly were, or only seemed so because he was having trouble seeing them as it got darker. He had mostly concluded that his map reading skills were severely lacking when he noticed that Quan had stopped and was waiting for them. When they reached Quan, Nash saw why: the rubber trees simply stopped, and they faced a wall of foliage made up of bushes, saplings, and various types of trees crowding together in a dense mass.

"Why are we stopping?" Trey croaked, apparently unable to raise his head enough to look around.

"We've reached the edge of the plantation," Nash explained. "Nothing but woods ahead of us."

"That's good, isn't it?" Harv asked.

"Yes and no," Nash answered. "It'll be easier to hide out in there, but harder to pull this cart around."

"It's getting dark, isn't it?" Trey asked weakly. "We need to stop, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess so," Nash acknowledged. He motioned to Harv and together they raised their end of the cart so the back end was resting on the ground. "Quan, see if you can find a way in to a small clearing or something."

Quan nodded and moved to their left, probing the dense vegetation for a gap they could maneuver through. Nash and Harv stretched and rubbed their arms and hands while they rested. In a voice just above a mumble, Trey said, "I shouldn't have shot that third guy, huh?"

"What do you mean?" Nash asked, moving so he could face the man's back as he lay on his side.

"The other ARVN. He might have given up."

"And then what?" Nash asked reasonably. "We'd have a prisoner, one we couldn't explain to anyone. And I don't think he was going to surrender anyway. If you hadn't shot him, I would have."

“Yeah, maybe. But technically, he was on our side.”

“I don’t think there’s anybody on our side right now,” Nash said cynically. “As long as we’ve got this money, everybody wants us, but just not alive.”

“Maybe we ought to bury it, or burn it, or something,” Harv suggested.

“I don’t think that would help,” Nash told him. “If they didn’t know we had gotten rid of it, they’d still be looking for us, and if they did know, they’d be so pissed they’d kill us anyway. Our only hope is to get back to Dau Tieng with it and let the officers figure it out.”

“Easier said than done,” Trey commented, talking into the side of a backpack.

The three men fell silent, contemplating their bleak future as the dimness grew around them.

“This way,” Quan said, suddenly reappearing next to them. Nash and Harv again grabbed the table legs and began dragging the cart as they followed Quan through the gathering gloom. After about forty yards Quan made a sharp right turn and motioned them to follow him into the brush. Nash was dubious at first, but found that the only things blocking their way were small bushes and high grass that barely impeding the wheels of the cart. It was even darker in the woods, but a few yards into the trees he sensed more than saw that they were in a small clearing where Quan had stomped down some saplings and high grass to make a space for the cart.

After letting the cart rock back to rest on the ground, Nash told Harv to take care of Trey while he went back to the clear grounds of the plantation. He stepped out of the brush and surveyed the shadowy rows of trees, but saw nothing of concern. Backing into the woods, he crouched down and fluffed up the grass and small bushes to erase the wheel tracks of the cart. When he re-entered the clearing, he felt an encouraging—but probably ephemeral—sense of safety and security. Surrounded by trees and bushes, invisible from more than a few feet away, they were better off than they had been since they entered the plantation.

Physically exhausted by pulling the cart, and emotionally drained by the unrelenting stress, Nash sat down next to a tree and leaned back against the trunk, cradling his rifle in his lap. Trey stayed where he was on the cart,

while Harv sat down on one of the tires and let his arms hang loosely by his side. Quan shrugged out of the radio backpack and squatted down beside it, inspecting the dials at the top.

“Anything new?” Nash asked Quan without really caring.

Quan shook his head. “They go home,” he said. “Turn off radio?”

“Might as well,” Nash agreed. “Save the battery.” The search of the three dead ARVNs had not found a spare battery, unfortunately. They had also not been carrying any field dressings or other medical supplies, a problem that really worried Nash. Trey needed fresh bandages and antibiotics, and soon.

“Maybe we ought to switch it to our freq,” Harv suggested.

“Do you know what it is?” Nash asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got a cheat sheet with each day’s freqs.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to listen in, see if they’re out searching for us.” As Nash said that, he noticed that Trey hadn’t said anything. While Harv went over and knelt down next to the radio, Nash struggled to his feet and stood by the cart, looking down at Jefferson with worry and compassion. It was getting too dark to see his face well, but Nash could see that his breathing was slow and labored.

“How you doing, Trey?” he asked, reaching down to touch his shoulder gently.

Jefferson sniffed. “Not good,” he grunted.

“We need to change your bandages,” Nash warned him.

“With what?” Trey asked. “Did you find a cache of medical supplies here in the woods?”

Nash was glad that Trey still had enough energy to be sarcastic. “Yeah, man, and a pretty round-eyed nurse, too.”

Trey scoffed, and then broke into a short coughing fit. Harv spoke up while still messing with the radio dials. “I’ve got some clean socks and drawers in my pack. We could use those.”

“Shit, so do I,” Nash said. They might not be sterile, but at least they were clean and absorbent.

Harv stood up. “It’s set to our freq now, but there’s nobody broadcasting.”

“Well, keep the volume down to a minimum. Quan, can you listen in, while Harv and I dress Trey’s wounds?”

Quan put his ear near the radio, and Nash and Harv gently moved Trey to the ground so they could dig through their packs for the clean clothing. When they had what they needed, they rolled Trey onto his stomach and pulled his pants down and his shirt up. Nash risked using the flashlight to inspect the wounds after they removed the old bandages, now sodden with blood and pus. The smaller wounds on his back had mostly stopped bleeding, but the larger ones were still raw and pink, with no sign of scabbing over. The leg wound, regrettably, was still seeping blood, and Nash had to grit his teeth to keep from gagging at the smell. Trey bit down on his forearm to muffle his screams when they washed the wounds with water and covered them with makeshift bandages, tying them on with some thin nylon rope Nash had brought. He didn’t pass out, but Nash wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. If he had become unconscious, Trey would at least be unaware of the pain, but then Nash would have become worried that the young sergeant might not wake up.

Nash and Harv put a poncho down and helped Trey crawl onto it, then covered him with a poncho liner and another poncho, the one that used to be Tony’s. Nash and the others then prepared their own beds for the night, and fixed themselves some LRRP rations. No one talked as they ate, and Nash was content with that silence. It gave him time to think about what they would do in the morning, although the options seemed very limited. After they ate, Nash set up a guard schedule for Quan, Harv, and himself, going with a two-hours-on, four-hours-off plan that excluded Trey so he could get plenty of rest. Since they had heard nothing for an hour, Nash had Quan turn the radio off, and everyone settled in for the night.

# ELEVEN

Although he had been in a deep dreamless sleep, Nash came awake instantly when Quan jostled his arm. “NVA,” Quan whispered. Nash sat up and felt around in the dark for his rifle. He had mounted the starlight during his first guard shift, and had left Trey’s starlight out for the others to use during their own shifts, if necessary. “Out there,” Quan added, placing his forearm on Nash’s shoulder so Nash could follow his pointing finger in the almost solid darkness. The relative openness of the plantation made it seem lighter than the dense woods, and Nash quietly crawled through the low brush toward the edge of the forest. Sitting down on the ground with his knees drawn up for support, he pushed the suppressor through the last curtain of grass and flipped on the starlight.

There were two of them, passing from left to right, about two hundred meters away. They wore standard NVA uniforms with pith helmets, and both carried AK-47s. As they entered the lane of rubber trees directly in front of him, Nash flicked off the safety and began tracking the nearest man, while he debated whether he should shoot or not. He quickly reached the conclusion that shooting would only reveal their presence, and thus put them back on the run again, this time in the darkness. As it was now, the enemy soldiers could not see him or know that the sniper team was hidden inside the tree line, so they were temporarily out of danger.

The correctness of his decision was confirmed when Quan whispered, “More.” Swinging the rifle to the left, Nash saw a larger group of soldiers following the first two, moving in two semi-straight columns of about ten men each, with a single man walking beside the columns like a sergeant or officer. Nash could hear soft chatter from the formation, and the men were obviously not expecting any attack. One of the men made a comment loud enough for all to hear, and that generated a wave of laughter among the men, silenced by a barked command from the leader walking beside them. Clearly these men were not looking for the sniper team; they were probably just on their way south to reinforce another unit or prepare an attack on Saigon.

Nash's orders were to disrupt such movement, but the group was too large for the depleted team to take on, and they had no way to report the enemy force. All he could do was observe and hopefully report it later.

Nash continued to track the group until they were out of sight and hearing, then relaxed. He was next in the guard rotation, and knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, so he told Quan to turn in while he stayed just inside the tree line to watch for any more troops in the area. A few minutes later he noticed that Quan was still behind him, just a few feet to his right.

"Go," he told Quan. "Sleep."

"Not tired," Quan replied. "Morning soon."

Nash shook his head and shrugged. "You might not get another chance anytime soon."

"Okay." Quan didn't move.

Nash made another sweep with the starlight scope, then switched it off and sat down with the rifle across his lap.

"What did that man say that was so funny?" Nash asked.

Quan took a moment to phrase his answer. "He say girls in Saigon let sergeant have boom-boom for free because he so small."

Nash chuckled. Soldiers were the same everywhere.

His mouth dry from the tension, Nash pulled his hard canteen from its holster on his web belt and took a drink. The plastic bottle was getting pretty light, due to the low level it contained, and that made Nash wonder just how they were doing on their water supply. "How much water do you have, Quan?"

"Some," Quan replied noncommittally.

Tony had not had much left in his canteens, which they had taken with them, and they had used a lot to wash Trey's wounds, so Nash was certain they were getting low. The three ARVNs had been carrying canteens, but they were nearly empty, and Nash hadn't trusted the quality of the water in them. They might have to start rationing, he thought. And then he heard the patter of raindrops on the leaves overhead. "Come on," he told Quan. "Wake up Trey and Harv."

Scrambling back to the clearing, Nash found his poncho and dug through his pack for the coil of rope remaining after securing Trey's bandages. With Harv's and Quan's assistance he strung the poncho between some trees at about waist height, parallel to the ground, the hood of the poncho hanging below it. He sent Quan out to the plantation to bring back a couple of the pottery collection bowls and set one of them directly below the hood opening of the poncho. By then the rain had increased to a torrent, and water quickly accumulated on the rubberized poncho and ran down toward the center, where it trickled into the bowl below.

As one bowl was filled, it was replaced by the other, and the water in the first bowl was carefully poured into the nearly empty canteens. The rain shower only lasted for about thirty minutes, but that was enough to replenish their water supply to nearly what they had started with. Dawn arrived shortly after the rain stopped, and Nash had to take stock of their situation and decide their next move.

In the morning light Nash could better assess the forest around them, and it wasn't promising. Away from the edge of the plantation the undergrowth thinned out, but there was still enough brush to impede the cart, even if they could find areas where the trees were far enough apart to allow them through. Maintaining their direction would be more difficult in the woods, and they would have less warning if there were enemy troops around. While Quan and Harv helped Trey get back on the cart and packed up their gear, Nash wandered farther into the forest to see if it looked better there. He found a narrow trail, one that might just be a game trail, but it wasn't suitable for the cart, and might be one used by the communists. Returning to the clearing where the others waited, he shook his head.

"The woods are a no-go," he informed them. "But if we travel along the edge of the rubber, we'll only have to watch the plantation side, and we'll have the woods to duck into if we see anyone." He looked down at Trey, who was again lying on his left side, his left knee drawn up, his right leg extended, his eyes closed. "What do you think?" Nash asked him.

Jefferson opened one eye and gave a barely perceptible shrug. Although the rain had left the air cool, at least for Viet Nam, there was a sheen of sweat on Trey's forehead, and Nash saw a slight tremor in the man's shoulders. Nash bit his lower lip, increasingly worried about Trey's ability to last until they reached Dau Tieng. He repositioned his rifle on the cart where it was

readily available, and then grabbed the table leg and pushed it down until the cart was level. Harv took the other leg and shifted his M-79 grenade launcher in his right hand until it was comfortable. He nodded his readiness to Nash.

“Quan, go see if the coast is clear.” Quan gave him a quizzical look, and Nash realized the Vietnamese might not be familiar with American idioms. He clarified: “See if any enemy soldiers are in the rubber.” Quan gave a sharp nod and disappeared through the fringe of vegetation that separated them from the plantation.

A minute later Quan reappeared. “Okay,” he said simply, then turned and pushed his way back out of the woods. Signaling to Harv with his head, Nash got the cart rolling and followed Quan.

Nash was surprised by how exposed he felt as they broke free of the brush and into the expansive rubber plantation, turning south to follow Quan. There was a tingle on his back, as if someone were taking aim at him, and he kept glancing back to reassure himself there was no one there. With Tony gone, and Trey so weak, there was no one watching their backs, and that worried Nash a lot. Worse, he was on the left side of the cart, closest to the vast open spaces between the trees, and farthest from the dubious safety of the forest. And all he had for immediate protection was his .45 pistol on his right hip, where he would have to drop the table leg in order to draw it. And the .45 was well known to be accurate only within twenty yards at best.

His head was in constant motion, trying to watch the ground immediately ahead of the cart to avoid holes and obstacles, glance at Quan a hundred yards ahead to see if he might be reacting to something he had observed, and search behind and beside them for anyone approaching from those directions. He was also concerned about a low squeal that seemed to be coming from one of the cart’s wheels, perhaps signaling a bad bearing. The next time they stopped to rest, he promised himself, he would try and squirt some LSA gun lubricant into the wheel bearings.

For now, at least, the clouds had parted and sunshine dappled the ground, beams of light filtering through the rubber trees’ leaves and making it more difficult to see details at a distance. The bright sun increased the depth of the shade, and since it was morning, the glare was to their left, just where Nash needed to have clear vision.

“Like the man who jumped off the Empire State building said as he

passed the fiftieth floor,” Harv remarked, “so far, so good.”

Nash groaned at the tired old joke, but was glad Harv was able to keep his spirits up. They were in an extremely precarious position, and he would not have blamed Harv for falling into a pit of despair, especially after seeing how hard Harv had taken Tony’s death. And Nash had to agree, they were making pretty good progress this morning. He knew from studying the map that all they had to do was keep skirting the forest as they headed south, and eventually they would reach the main road to Dau Tieng. That road was fairly heavily patrolled by American forces, so they should be able to get help and call in a medevac for Trey. But could they reach that road before nightfall? Nash had no idea how far that road was, nor how fast they were actually moving, so he couldn’t even estimate. All he could do was hope.

It had been more than an hour since they had left the clearing where they had spent the night, and Nash was thinking of calling a brief halt to rest, check on Trey, and try to lubricate the cart’s wheels. Then he saw Quan suddenly drop to the ground and give them a quick wave to stop. Scanning the rows of tree trunks, Nash could not see what had alerted Quan, but stopping the cart, and the accompanying squeak from the wheels, allowed him to detect the sound of engines. Quan made an urgent pushing signal with his arm indicating they should move into the forest, and then began low-crawling backwards toward the tree line.

“There,” Nash said, pointing toward an opening in the brush, and he and Harv quickly pulled the heavily laden vehicle through the high grass until they were well within the shelter of the woods, then let the cart tilt back with a bump that disturbed Trey.

“What’s going on?” Trey wheezed, trying to lift his head.

“Quan saw something,” Harv told him.

“What?”

“Don’t know yet,” Nash said, picking up his rifle and removing the lens covers on the scope.

Slipping silently through the woods like a startled deer, Quan joined them, a look of determination on his face. “ARVNs,” he said. “APCs.”

“How many?” Nash asked him.

Quan held up three fingers. “One has cannon,” he said. Nash knew that

what Quan had seen was probably a recoilless rifle, not a cannon. He had seen ARVN M-113 armored personnel carriers with the long rocket launchers mounted on top, usually where most APCs had machine guns. And that confirmed the vehicles were ARVN, since American units didn't have any tracks armed that way.

"How many dismounts? Soldiers walking?"

Quan closed his eyes for a second, and then said, "Twenty. Maybe."

Due to their earlier encounter, Nash was not inclined to announce themselves to these supposedly allied fighters. He still believed that perhaps only one or two of the ARVNs were renegades willing to kill Americans for the money, but he had no way of telling which ones were good guys, and which ones weren't. The safest course of action was to only approach Americans.

"Which direction are they going?" he asked Quan.

"North," Quan replied. He spread three fingers of his left hand and moved them slowly forward to demonstrate that the three APCs were moving on line, and not in a column. Which meant they were searching for something. Quan pointed to the southeast and said, "Far. Maybe five, six hundred."

At that distance it was unlikely any of the ARVNs had spotted them; Nash was surprised Quan had been able to make out that much detail at that distance. Looking around, Nash spotted a likely tree and went over to it, staring up into the branches. "Hold this," he told Quan, handing his rifle over to him. He wrapped his right hand around a thick branch a foot above his head and pulled himself up enough to reach a higher branch with his left. He tried to get a grip on the trunk with his boots, but they kept slipping down until Harv came over and cupped his hands under Nash's foot to give him a boost. Nash scrambled onto the lower limbs, and then reached down to pull up the rifle that Quan extended to him. Juggling the rifle in his left hand, he climbed higher in the tree until he found a gap in the leaves that gave him a view out into the rubber. Clinging to the trunk like a monkey, he found a fork in the branches across which he could lay the fore stock, and put his eye to the scope.

The tree's branches prevented him from getting a good look to the southeast, although he thought he caught a brief glimpse of a rectangular

shape moving through the trees. From here he could definitely hear the diesel engines of the APCs, which were just above idle due to the slow approach. Slowly sweeping the scope left to figure out where he would first get a good look at the ARVNs, Nash thought he saw something. Bringing the scope back to the right just a hair, he twisted the reticle to get a clearer focus, and at first saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was the usual line of rubber trees with broad lanes coated with dead leaves, and occasional small shrubs or clumps of grass. With the sun rising higher in the sky, Nash could almost detect the movement of the sunbeams as they inched east across the floor of the plantation. He watched the spot of light crawl across the leaves for a moment, thinking about how he was actually watching the movement of the planet as it spun on its axis, when he saw a brassy sparkle that only lasted an instant.

Again adjusting the focus of his scope, he concentrated on the spot where the glint of light had been, and emptied his mind of preconceived images. Like one of those optical illusions, one second he was seeing just a small pile of leaves, and the next he detected the underlying shape of a pith helmet. An NVA soldier was in a foxhole, his camouflaged helmet just peeking up over the edge. “Where there’s one,” Nash whispered to himself, “there’s a bunch more.” Gradually he shifted the scope around until he found another suspicious shape hiding in the ground cover. The enemy soldiers were all over three or four hundred meters away, scattered through the lines of rubber trees to the southeast, making it hard to Nash to accurately determine the size of the force or its disposition.

“NVA ambush,” he called quietly down to Quan and Harv. “They’re waiting for the ARVNs.”

“Should we warn ‘em?” Harv asked.

“How?” Nash asked, his eye still pressed to the scope. “If any of them find out we’re here, we’re fucked, one way or another.”

It was possible, Nash knew, that neither these particular ARVNs, nor those NVA, were among those looking for the sniper team and the money, or were even aware of their existence. But he felt sure that was unlikely, especially for the ARVNs. A platoon of the South Vietnamese Army searching the Michelin by themselves was almost unthinkable, unless they had a specific and very secret mission. And the fact that the NVA had laid an

ambush for them implied a severe breach in security.

The tree branch Nash was sitting on was cutting off the circulation to his left leg, so Nash wiggled and shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. Looking over the top of the scope, he could now see the advance patrol of the ARVNs, two soldiers walking forward with little apparent caution right into the pocket of the NVA ambush.

“Better get ready,” Nash whispered to the men below him. “Once the shit hits the fan, somebody might head this way.” Nash paused. “But don’t shoot them unless you have to.”

“Roger,” Harv replied. He and Quan went over by the cart and faced the plantation, their guns held ready.

Nash turned his attention back to the distant scene of an impending clash, as the ARVN force advanced into what would soon be a cauldron of fire, unaware of the danger that faced them. He could now see all three of the boxy ARVN APCs, typically clean and neat, unlike the war-weary tracks of the Americans. The two closest to him had .50-caliber machine guns mounted on the front of the Track Commander hatch, although there was no surrounding cupola, just a thin rectangular shield mounted on the barrel of the gun. The farthest track had a 106-mm recoilless rifle mounted at the right rear of the top of the vehicle, and only an M-60 machine gun mounted on the TC hatch. From what he could see, the only soldiers actually manning the APCs were the driver and TC, along with one additional man standing in the cargo hatch alongside the 106. The rest of the unit was dismounted, a long line of soldiers spread out on either side of the tracks, and mostly armed with M-2 carbines.

The battle began with the flash of an RPG launched from the far side of the ambush, slashing through the air and slamming into the front of the APC with the recoilless rifle. It hit the wooden trim vane that covered the sloping glacis and exploded, sending splintered wood in every direction, but apparently not penetrating the engine cover beneath. Immediately all three tracks stopped and the men on the ground dropped into a prone position to begin firing wildly at an unseen enemy. An NVA heavy machine gun, firing from a location Nash couldn’t see, began thumping and sending green tracers across the front of the ARVN formation. The man in the TC hatch of the track closest to Nash fired one burst, and then furiously began pulling at the

charging handle as the gun jammed, only to stop when his head erupted in a spray of blood. The gunner in the middle track disappeared inside, and the track began backing up until it slammed into a rubber tree.

Nash watched in horror as some of the men on the ground tried to jump up and run away, only to be cut down by the growing crescendo of fire from the NVA, who were now popping up from their dug-in positions to fire their AK's and RPD light machine guns. It looked like a massacre, with the ARVN's caught in a trap with nowhere to turn and no artillery or air support available. Nash just couldn't let this continue without adding his support. While there were certainly some ARVNs who wanted to kill the sniper team, most of them remained their allies. As someone once said, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, so Nash clicked off the safety of his rifle. An NVA soldier holding an RPG stood up next to a rubber tree and aimed at the side of the track nearest Nash. Nash knew that with his suppressor, his shot would go unnoticed in the melee of gunfire that was happening in the distance. He brought the crosshairs to the middle of the RPG gunners back and squeezed the trigger.

The man just stood there for a moment, then dropped the RPG to the ground, reached around to feel his lower back, and then crumpled against the tree, sliding down until he was bunched up at the base. "A little low," Nash remarked to himself dispassionately. He looked for another target.

The recoilless rifle got off a shot, a crashing bang accompanying the blast of fire out the back of the weapon. There was no follow-on explosion, so either the gunner had missed everything with an HE round, or had fired a beehive or canister round. Nash hoped it was the latter, but he was too far away to see any possible damage those shotgun-type rounds would have caused. Nash found an NVA soldier in his sight who was firing an AK, standing up in a shallow hole to get a better aiming point. Nash fired, and saw the man's shoulder jerk. "High and to the right," he mumbled. He had to get better control of his breathing and trigger pull. Meanwhile the man had dropped his AK and was stumbling to the rear, clutching his right shoulder with his left hand. A wounded man was more trouble to the enemy than a dead one, so Nash let him go and sought another target.

He found the RPD gunner prone in the open, his loader lying beside him as they sprayed their deadly bullets across the line of ARVNs. Nash fine-tuned his scope, took a deep breath, let half of it out, and squeezed the

trigger. The loader on the far side of the gunner went limp, but the gunner didn't seem to notice. "Still too high," Nash grumbled, and lowered the crosshairs just a tiny bit, aiming at the space between the gunner's rib cage and the ground, and fired again. This time the gunner jerked and dropped his head, his finger still on the trigger and spraying rounds in a stream until the drum ran dry. Nash kept the scope on him for a few seconds, in case he was still alive, but was satisfied when he saw no further movement.

Raising his eye over the scope to seek additional targets, Nash saw the recoilless rifle gunner tumble off the back of the APC and crumple to the ground. Meanwhile, the track in the center had pulled a few feet forward and was doing a pivot steer by locking its left tread and grinding the right forward to spin the vehicle in a circle, while .51-caliber machine gun bullets, every fourth one a green tracer round, splattered into the vehicle or ricocheted up into the trees. At the right angle, Nash had been told, those heavy machine gun rounds would penetrate the thin aluminum armor of an APC. Nash tried to follow the track of the tracer rounds to their source, but even with his scope he could not see the gun, either because it was behind the tree trunks or extremely well camouflaged inside a bunker.

While the enemy's fire was concentrating on the attempted escape of the middle APC, Nash saw a few of the dismounted ARVNs make a run for it, scurrying back to take shelter behind the other two vehicles. One man ran to the side of the nearest track and tried to climb up the side so he could dive in through the cargo hatch, but an NVA marksman caught him with a burst of AK fire and sent him tumbling back to the ground. Farther out, two men did make it to the back of the track with the recoilless rifle, and they disappeared inside through the personnel hatch in the rear ramp. Moments later a head popped up in the cargo hatch and released the breechblock at the rear of the elongated recoilless rifle, ejecting the empty shell casing. Someone inside handed him one of the long tubular rounds and he slipped it inside the breech and slammed the back closed. Keeping his head down, he swung the eleven-foot-long tube more to the left, over the TC hatch, and raised his head to the sight mounted on the side, but shook his head and ducked back inside.

The center APC had finally got turned the way the driver wanted and began roaring away from the battle, followed by the tracer rounds that suddenly ceased. Nash wasn't sure if the machine gunner had given up on the departing track, or had paused to feed in a new belt of ammo. The fifty-

cal gunner on the nearest track was still firing, peppering the ground between the trees to his front to at least keep the enemy's head down. Nash caught movement out of the corner of his right eye, and glanced over to see an NVA soldier approaching the closest APC from behind, his AK-47 raised to his shoulder in preparation for shooting the track's machine gunner in the back. Nash had no idea how the man had gotten behind the ARVNs, but there was no time to waste thinking about it. He swung his XM-21 around, took hasty aim through the unfocused scope, and pulled off three quick rounds. The NVA soldier stumbled and then fell onto his right side before he had a chance to fire. His left hand went up in a pleading gesture, but then fell limply to his side. Nash focused the scope on the fallen man's back, took slow and careful aim, and fired one more time, seeing the hole appear in the man's uniform right where he intended. Nash had time to feel only a moment of gratification before his attention was drawn away by the roar of the farthest APC's engine.

The driver steered the track a little to the left and then darted forward into the next lane between the trees, the lane recently occupied by the retreating track. Nash realized the crew was bravely trying to get an angle on the heavy machine gun by darting into his line of fire. The machine gun had been silent for a few seconds, but when the track appeared, the gunner opened up again. His pintle was set too low, however, and the stream of bullets slammed into the lower front of the vehicle, glancing off the sloping front of the hull into the ground. This mistake on the NVA gunner's part gave the recoilless rifle gunner the opportunity he needed. Raising his head up to the sight, unbothered by incoming rounds, he swung the barrel around toward the source of the bullets and pulled the trigger. The blast of the rocket out the back of the gun was deafening even at this distance, and instantly the enemy machine gun ceased its thumping.

The din of the firefight now subsided to only occasional rifle shots from both sides, and bursts of fifty-cal fire from the nearer APC. Nash could hear shouts in the brief lulls between gunshots, and more of the dismounted ARVNs scrambled to their feet and ran to the protection of the APCs. Once those few men had boarded, the APCs began backing away slowly from the ambush site, continuing to fire to cover their retreat. Once they were about fifty yards back, they swung around one hundred and eighty degrees and roared away as fast as the vehicles could manage.

The gunfire ended, and Nash began to feel like he was in a somewhat precarious position. Without the din of battle, he could no longer shoot without revealing his presence, and he was now uncomfortably aware of the pain in his legs and ass from sitting on the narrow limb of this tree. He wanted to climb down, but feared that the movement might draw the attention of the NVA soldiers who were now crawling out of their holes and wandering around the battlefield. There were at least fifteen or sixteen soldiers on their feet, and several more who sat or lay on the ground groaning in pain. A few of the soldiers went forward to inspect the bodies of the fallen ARVN soldiers, kicking the bodies with their feet to ensure the men were dead. When one of the ARVNs reacted to the kick, the NVA soldier calmly pointed his AK-47 at the man's head and fired a single shot.

Nash had an almost overwhelming desire to shoot the enemy executioner, but fought it down, knowing it would bring an assault on himself and his friends below. Worse, despite his visceral reaction to the shooting of a wounded man, he knew that he might have done the same thing, had he been in that situation. Grimly he watched as the NVA soldiers searched the ARVN bodies for booty and gathered up their weapons. Other soldiers were lifting up the bodies of the NVA soldiers who had died in the firefight, carrying them over to a central location and carefully laying them out side by side. One man had a radio and was carrying on an animated conversation over it. The soldiers were too distant to make out any words, even if Nash spoke Vietnamese, but the tone of voice made it clear they were not particularly jubilant about their pyrrhic victory.

A drop of water on the lens blurred the image in his scope, and it was soon joined by more drops. Nash hadn't noticed the gradual darkening of the day, but now the rain broke through and began drenching the area. It was time to get down.

# TWELVE

“What happened?” Harv asked. Nash twisted and stretched to get the kinks out of his limbs and back as the rain filtered down through the forest and began to soak his uniform.

“Yeah,” Trey said weakly from the cart. His eyes were bright, but his skin was ashen. The original patter of the raindrops had swollen to a steady low drumming that effectively masked any sounds made by the NVA soldiers out in the plantation, and by the same token ensured they could not hear the Americans. Nash quickly described the action that had taken place, as seen from his perch in the trees, since the men here below would have been unable to see virtually any of it.

“So the ARVNs cut and run,” Trey commented with a disgusted shake of his head. The American Army’s disdain for the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam was ingrained, and not without some justification.

“Well, that one track certainly did,” Nash agreed. “I think that must have been the one with the officer. The other two kept fighting and made a decent withdrawal. They were pretty well outnumbered, anyway.”

“How many did you take out?” Harv asked, nodding toward Nash’s rifle.

“Four or five,” Nash replied dismissively. “I wasn’t counting. Wasn’t enough to change the outcome.”

“At least we can report a body count,” Trey said. Nash wasn’t sure if the wounded man was being sarcastic or not.

“How are you doing, man?” Nash asked him, truly worried about Trey’s deteriorating health.

Jefferson shrugged. “It’s not hurting as much,” he said, “but I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

Nash understood. When a wound stopped hurting, it could mean it was getting better, or it could mean it was so much worse the pain was irrelevant. “It won’t be much longer,” Nash promised him, knowing that was a lie. The

look in Trey's eyes told Nash that he, too, knew it was a lie. Nash took a quick look around. "Where's Quan?" he asked anxiously.

Harv looked up, and Nash followed his gaze. Quan had gone up the tree where Nash had been shooting, apparently right after Nash came down. He was sitting up on the fork of the tree, his AK-47 resting on his lap, maintaining a watch on the NVA soldiers out in the plantation with the binoculars. Nash felt a twinge of shame that he hadn't thought to order such a guard. Then he noticed the ARVN radio propped against the base of the tree.

Harv saw where he was looking. "Quan was listening to the ARVNs," he told Nash. "He said it sounded like a captain reamed some lieutenant a new asshole for getting ambushed and running away. Then he asked the lieutenant if he thought the NVA had found 'the Americans who killed our men,' us, I think he means."

"Quan said that?"

"Harv is paraphrasing," Trey interjected with a wince. "But yeah, that was the gist of it. Quan said the captain didn't mention the money, just wanted the 'American murderers.'"

"He just wants the money," Harv said angrily. "And his guys fired first."

"We're lucky that NVA ambush didn't spot us as we came up behind them," Nash noted solemnly. "I guess they were concentrated on the ARVNs. But how did they know the ARVNs were coming this way?"

"The same way they always know where the B-52s are going to strike," Harv said. "Somebody in Saigon is passing them the information."

Nash nodded. It was commonly accepted by the American soldiers that corrupt South Vietnamese officials were cooperating with the enemy, and the communists had moles at every level. One cynical pundit had even suggested the "raft theory" to end the war: take all the South Vietnamese citizens who were loyal to democracy and America and put them on a giant raft in the South China Sea. Next, nuke the country. Finally, sink the raft. Nash wasn't that dismissive of the people of South Vietnam, and he had grown to trust Quan as much as he trusted his fellow Americans, but he had to admit the South Vietnamese government was not totally reliable.

A low whistle from above made Nash look up. Quan was looking down with a concerned expression on his face. “Jeep coming,” he informed them in a low voice.

“Whose?” Nash asked, picking up his rifle.

Quan turned to look into the distance, shielding his eyes from the rain with one hand. “NVA,” he reported, pointing to the northeast.

“Let me see,” Nash told him. While Quan slid down the tree trunk, Nash took a moment to release the partially depleted magazine from his rifle and insert a fresh one. Giving the weapon to Quan to hold, Nash scrambled back up the tree and reached down for the barrel of the rifle as Quan pushed it up to him. Weaving the weapon through the network of limbs, he brought it to his shoulder and peered through the scope, pointing it toward the engine noise he could now just barely make out over the thrumming of the rain. At first he could not see it, but finally it rounded a line of rubber trees and roared down the lane toward the ambush site, where NVA soldiers milled around waiting.

It was an old Dodge three-quarter ton truck, a relic of World War II. It was essentially a four-wheel-drive pickup, a civilian version of which was later sold by Dodge as the Powerwagon. The US Army still had a few assigned, and had provided many of them to the ARVNs. They had probably also been used by the French in the 1950’s, so there was no telling who had owned this one before the NVA acquired it. Still, it was unusual to see the communists using military vehicles openly in South Viet Nam. Nash wondered what would be next—tanks attacking Saigon?

He watched as the soldiers loaded the dead and wounded into the back of the truck, while two of the soldiers, apparently officers or NCO’s, stood a few feet away and carried on an intense discussion, full of pointing and arm-waving. It appeared that the person in charge of the ambush was explaining his failings to the passenger of the truck and in return receiving strongly-worded new instructions. As soon as the truck was loaded, the high-ranking passenger climbed back in and the vehicle roared away back to the north, leaving the lower-ranking leader to pass out new orders to the men who remained. Soaked by the continuing rain, and with slumped shoulders, the soldiers were paired up and sent in various directions. Nash wondered if they had been told to resume the search for the sniper team. That thought had just

crossed his mind when he noticed that one of the pairs was headed almost directly toward the woods where the sniper team was hiding.

“Pst! Take my rifle!” he whispered down to Quan, and half-fell down the slippery tree in his haste to get back on the ground. “A couple gooks are headed this way!” he warned the others quietly, taking his rifle back from Quan. “Everybody get down.”

Trey gave him a questioning look. He was still on the cart, and helping him down onto the damp earth would take time and effort, and probably make noise. Nash shrugged, and after a second shook his head. Trey nodded his understanding and brought his own rifle up where he could use it if necessary.

Nash got down in a prone position, lowering his bipod and pointing his rifle toward the screen of brush and grass that hid them from the open plantation. Quan laid down a few feet to his right, his AK-47 covering the southern quadrant, and Harv was to his left, now holding Tony’s M-16. Silently they waited, praying that the gooks wouldn’t enter the forest and find them.

They couldn’t see the NVA soldiers, but soon they could hear them. The two men were chattering away in a remarkably cheerful tone, and their voices got louder as they came nearer to the hidden sniper team. Nash wondered what they were saying, and glanced over at Quan, who had a puzzled expression on his face. Quan realized Nash was looking at him, caught his eye, and raised his eyebrows. Nash had no idea what he meant by that. As the enemy voices came nearer, Nash could tell they were headed more to his right than directly toward him, and he swung the barrel of his rifle to follow the sounds.

It seemed like the two had stopped right at the edge of the woods. One of them said something that sounded like a polite question or invitation, and the other answered in a worried tone, dropping his voice. The first made another suggestion, perhaps, or offered encouragement, and the other one at first argued weakly, and then acquiesced. Nash knew he might be reading a lot more into the conversation than was really there, since he didn’t understand the language, but he was pretty good at interpreting tones of voice. Quan looked over his left shoulder at Nash, and the look of amazement on his face thoroughly confused Nash. Quan did not appear

concerned, however, so Nash waited to see what would happen next.

Rain rattled the leaves overhead, but Nash could still hear the unmistakable sound of grass and bushes being pushed aside as the two soldiers penetrated the edge of the forest, apparently only a few yards away. As quietly as he could, Nash squirmed around and low-crawled over to the other side of Quan, so both of them would be facing the area of the woods where the two NVA were now searching. The brush was too thick to see the men, but Nash could certainly feel and hear their presence. He glanced back at the cart, and saw that Trey had his own rifle to his shoulder, awkwardly pointing it over Nash's head.

The pair had only gone a few yards into the forest when they stopped, and the tone of their conversation changed. Nash thought he heard the sound of weapons or equipment being dropped on the ground, and the two men began murmuring in gentle voices. Then one of them giggled!

Nash looked over at Quan, seeking enlightenment, and Quan was smirking and stifling a laugh. Nash was baffled. What the hell was going on over there? Then he heard more sounds, moans of pleasure and other unmistakable noises, and his mouth gaped at what he was listening to. Suddenly he could imagine what the two men were doing, and he vainly tried to shut it out of his mind. Finally there were some sharp gasps and groans, followed by a minute of silence. Then one of the unseen men said something that sounded a little worried, and there was a rapid rustle of clothes and equipment before the two burst out of the woods back into the plantation. The voices quickly drifted away to the south.

"What the fuck?" Harv mouthed at Nash, his eyes wide. Trey lowered his rifle and snorted into the crook of his arm. Quan rolled over on his back, his hand clamped across his mouth as his chest heaved with laughter. Nash just lay there and shook his head slowly back and forth. This had to be a first.

Nash patted the air with his left hand to keep everyone quiet, and slowly stood up to look around. Leaning his rifle against the cart, he pulled himself up into the tree again, just enough to see out into the plantation, and detected no movement. Dropping back down, he picked up his rifle and said, "They're gone."

"Were they. . .?" Harv asked in wonderment.

Nash nodded. "I think so."

"Lady-boys make boom-boom," Quan smirked.

"That's. . ." Harv started, but couldn't finish. Trey finished the sentence for him.

"Disgusting?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, right after a battle and all."

"Love knows no boundaries," Nash said, quoting something he had heard in a movie or on TV, and instantly regretted the remark.

"I'm not sure that was true love," Trey said. "I think they were just horny."

"Heck," Harv said, "I'm horny, too, but not THAT horny."

"I should hope not," Trey told him. "Now, if you were a sailor. . ." He left the sentence unfinished, raising one eyebrow.

"Hey, my dad was in the Navy," Harv protested.

"Hmm," Trey said speculatively, grinning.

"Knock it off," Nash commanded them. "What did they say?" he asked Quan.

"Put it here. Oh, yes. It feel good." Quan mimicked the sound of the two soldiers, chuckling as he did so.

"No," Nash told him with exasperation, "besides that. Did they say anything about us?"

Quan got serious. "Yes. They look for Americans with money. They think ARVNs look for money too."

"Shit, I was afraid of that." Nash chewed on his lower lip. "And those two lovebirds just headed south, where we need to go."

"We'll have to wait until dark," Trey said, sagging back on the bed of packs.

"I guess so," Nash admitted ruefully. He stared at the ground as rainwater dribbled off the brim of his boonie hat.

Soaked and miserable, the team spent the afternoon in desultory conversation and occasional napping. They took turns sitting in the tree watching for enemy activity, and Quan would listen to the radio trying to pick up additional information about the search for them, but with little luck. Around four o'clock the rain finally stopped and they began to dry out, although they were actually chilled by the breeze that sprang up.

"Harv, give me the sixteen," Nash said suddenly, reaching out for Tony's rifle.

"Where you going?" Trey croaked.

Nash stood up, adjusted his pistol belt, and checked the magazine in the M-16. "I'm bored," he said. "I'm going to go out and look around."

"Want me to come?" Harv asked.

"No, I'm just going to do a quick recon. Why don't you guys start getting ready to move out."

Nash cautiously shoved aside the branches of the bushes and stepped to the edge of the forest, pausing there to scan the open plantation, the rows of trees narrowing in the distance. There was no movement, and the only sign of the recent battle were the distant dark lumps that marked the bodies of fallen ARVNs. He wondered how long it would be before the ARVNs came to retrieve them. Neither seeing anything, nor even vaguely sensing the presence of any other humans, Nash slipped out of the woods and darted to the nearest rubber tree, coming to a halt with his left shoulder pressed against the trunk. He waited for any possible reaction, then peeked around the trunk and scanned up and down all the lanes he could see from that one tree. It was still clear, so he trotted to the next tree and repeated his visual search.

Moving from tree to tree, angling to the south, he was soon in the middle of the former firefight. He saw the spider holes and small bunkers the NVA had dug. He even found the bunker where the heavy machine gun must have been set up; the tree next to the bunker was bristling with the metal fins of the flechettes the ARVN recoilless rifle had fired. A beehive round had done the trick, flaying the gunners with scores of the little metal darts. All signs of the gun itself were gone, however, and Nash was surprised to see that there were no spent shell casings littered about either. The NVA had policed all their brass; he wondered if they were just excessively neat, or were they re-using the brass somehow.

When he wandered over to where the ARVNs had been, the brass there had also been picked up. Nash began to think the NVA must be reclaiming the brass as an austerity move; unlike the United States, they did not have unlimited resources. They were fighting this war on the cheap, despite aid from China and Russia, and needed to make every bullet count. So he could understand why they were so anxious to recover the cash Nash and the team were carrying.

As he headed back to the woods, Nash came across another ARVN body, but this one seemed unnatural somehow. The man was lying face down, but his back was humped. Nash knelt down and pushed against the man's hip, rolling the body sideways. Under his body was a canvas bag, one that Nash instantly recognized as a US Army aid bag, standard issue to medics. Tugging at it, Nash had to untangle the shoulder strap from the man's head and arm, but finally pulled it free and stood up to examine it. A quick glance inside determined that it was fully packed, and Nash heaved a sigh of relief. At last they could take care of Trey in a more meaningful manner. With one more look around to ensure he was still alone, Nash hurried back to the woods to rejoin his friends.

# THIRTEEN

The aid bag turned out to be a treasure trove for Trey. Harv and Quan used the supplies to clean Trey's wounds, apply sulfa powder, and put on fresh bandages. They also found penicillin pills for Trey to swallow, along with mild pain killers. Although he complained about the roughness of their ministrations, Trey was clearly pleased by the attention and seemed to feel better almost immediately.

Meanwhile Nash took advantage of the break in the rainfall to field strip and clean his XM-21, and then did Trey's as well. As before, he put his rifle inside the unzipped carrying bag to keep it clean and dry, but easily accessible. When they had finished with Trey, Harv and Quan cleaned their own weapons, and Nash was not really surprised when Quan had to help Harv disassemble the M-16; Harv hadn't cleaned an M-16 since AIT, and Quan had undoubtedly been trained on the weapon when he was a Viet Cong. Despite their precarious circumstances, the team's spirits had been raised by the discovery of the aid bag and their ability to help Trey. Jefferson, in turn, was already showing a renewed energy, managing to climb off the cart and stumble a few feet away to take a leak by himself.

Harv fixed some LRRP rations for everyone, and they sat around eating the gooey mess waiting for dark. While they ate, Quan fiddled with the ARVN radio, holding his head close to the speaker which was turned to the lowest volume. His face brightened and he sat back and turned the volume up just enough for the others to hear. Over the tinny speaker, with horrible sound quality, came the strident music of The Box Tops, singing the unofficial song of the American soldiers in Viet Nam, *The Letter*. "Give me a ticket for an airplane, ain't got time to take a fast train."

Nash chuckled. "This is one hell of a bizarre war," he commented.

"What do you mean?" Trey asked. He was sitting edgeways on one of the cart tires spooning out some LRRP rations.

“Well, today we’ve had sex. . .” Nash nodded toward the area where they had heard the two NVA soldiers fooling around, “drugs. . .” pointing to the aid bag on the cart, “and rock’n’roll. What more can you ask for?” Everyone laughed, even Quan, although Nash wasn’t sure the Vietnamese understood the reference.

“How about world peace?” Harv suggested, still laughing.

Trey looked at him with mock scorn. “What are you, a Miss America contestant?”

“I’d settle for a cold Coke and a real bed with clean sheets,” Nash offered.

“Lots of boom-boom,” Quan said seriously. “With girls,” he hastily clarified. That started everyone laughing again.

As the laughter died down, Trey looked at the ground and sighed. “Yeah, well, I just want to go home.”

“Bet that,” Harv affirmed. Nash nodded his agreement. The group went silent, as each man thought about his home and family.

“What about the money?” Harv asked out of nowhere.

“The money?” Nash frowned at him.

“Yeah. I mean, what are they gonna do with it when we turn it in?”

Nash hadn’t thought about that. He shrugged and looked at Trey for guidance.

Trey closed his eyes for a moment as he considered the question, then spoke. “My guess is that the South Vietnamese money will be given to the government in Saigon. The dollars, I don’t know. Assuming they’re not counterfeit, I guess they’ll go back into the US Treasury somehow.”

“How would that work?” Harv asked. “They just haul some suitcases full of cash into the building and say, ‘Hey, I’d like to make a deposit’?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Trey confessed.

“And how much of it will actually make it there?” Harv asked cynically.

“They’ll count it,” Nash said reasonably. “There’ll be receipts and all.”

“When will they count it?” Harv countered. “And who?” These were rhetorical questions, but Harv was obviously implying malfeasance in the

process. Harv's distrust of the system now raised doubts in Nash's own mind.

"VC get some back," Quan muttered. Nash understood what Quan was implying; there were always rumors that South Vietnamese officials were secretly providing the VC with money and supplies. Nash had heard stories about GIs capturing enemy weapons in battle that were turned over to the ARVNs, only to reappear in the hands of the VC.

Quan turned off the radio, and Nash listened to see if there were any sounds out of the ordinary. All he could hear were the usual noises of the forest, the creaking of branches in the breeze, the chirping and clicking of insects. He looked up through the branches, and saw the first star of the evening. "Let's move out," he said, pushing himself to his feet.

Things went well at first. With Quan again on point with a starlight scope, Nash and Harv pulled the cart down the seemingly endless lanes of rubber trees, keeping the edge of the forest just within sight to their right. Nash's lubrication of the wheel bearings had worked, and the cart rolled smoothly and quietly. Trey felt well enough to hold his XM-21 with the other starlight attached and make occasional visual sweeps of the area behind them.

After their first rest break, they heard the sound of a large prop-driven airplane somewhere overhead, circling the Michelin. The plane had a loudspeaker, and it began broadcasting discordant Vietnamese music, the almost atonal twanging hurting Nash's ears. When the music ended, a voice came on and blasted away in Vietnamese, apparently spewing propaganda encouraging the VC and NVA to surrender. Nash thought he heard the words "Chieu Hoi," and wondered if it was such aerial pleas that had convinced Quan to give himself up.

Eventually the pilot got tired of annoying the natives; the loudspeaker crackled off and the engine noise faded into the distance. Nash was extremely glad, because the noise had prevented him from hearing any possible threats in the plantation. On the other hand, he noted, the blessed silence from above allowed him to better hear the rustle of the leaves under their feet and the slight creaking of the cart's axles. He might have to grease the bearing again, he thought.

“Glad that shit’s gone,” Trey grumbled from beside him. “I can’t believe they call that music.”

“Could be worse,” Harv said. “Could have been polka music.”

“Yeah,” Trey agreed, “or country and western.”

“Shh!” Nash warned them. “Someone might hear you. Like me.”

In renewed silence they trudged along, rolling the cart down the middle of the lane between the trees that were lined up with military precision. They were like officers reviewing the troops in a giant parade and review, Nash imagined. Enveloped in darkness, they could just barely discern the trees to either side, enough to keep them on a straight course, but not enough to see anything beyond the nearest trunks. Thus Nash nearly jumped when Quan suddenly appeared in front of them, holding his right hand up for them to stop. The starlight was clutched in his other hand, and his AK-47 was strapped to his back.

“Enemy,” Quan whispered. “Come look.”

Nash and Harv lowered the back of the cart to the ground, and Nash pulled his rifle from the carrying bag. It still had his ART scope, so he quickly exchanged it for the starlight Quan had been carrying. When he was ready, he motioned for Quan to lead on.

Quan and Nash jogged forward down the lane, with Quan angling over toward the row of trees that bordered the lane on the right. Finally he stopped at one of the trees and peeked around the trunk into the next lane. Drawing back, he motioned for Nash to have a look. Nash edged up to the tree and leaned out just enough to peer down the adjacent lane; there it was—the flickering flame of a campfire. In the almost total darkness, with no points of reference, it was hard to judge the distance, but Nash figured it had to be at least four or five hundred yards away. He switched on his starlight scope and brought the rifle up to his shoulder. While the scope greatly amplified light, its telescopic properties were limited; nonetheless, he could now make out at least a couple figures sitting near the small fire, and their size in the grainy green image gave him a better idea of the range. In daylight, with his ART scope, he could almost certainly hit them, but at night, with the starlight, his chances for a first shot kill were small. He would have to get closer.

Turning to face Quan, Nash said, "Go back to the cart." Quan hesitated, as if he was going to argue, but then scurried away. Nash took a deep breath and ran his fingers over his rifle, reassuring himself it was locked and loaded, with the safety off. He switched off the starlight to conserve the battery, and then pushed off from the tree, heading farther down the lane that the cart was in. Although the row of trees mostly shielded him from the encampment ahead, Nash took his time, high-stepping to avoid tripping on anything. Every third or fourth tree he would stop and peek around into the neighboring lane to judge how close he was getting, and to ensure the men at the fire had not been alerted. When he decided he was within a couple hundred yards of the fire, he knelt down next to a tree and slowly eased his rifle around until it was pointed in the right direction, while simultaneously turning the starlight scope back on.

Pressing his eye to the scope, he analyzed the scene it revealed. The fire was small, and Nash wondered where the men had found wood dry enough to burn, either in the sodden forest behind them or in the plantation in front. Nash could see only two men, NVA by their uniforms, squatting next to each other a few feet from the fire. Their pith helmets lay on the ground, and their AK's were propped on the upside-down helmets. They had their backs to the nearby woods, which meant Nash was observing them at an angle, with the one on the right closer to him. The two men seemed animated, and Nash thought he detected the sound of easy conversation and light laughter. He couldn't help but wonder if these were the same two men who had been frolicking in the woods earlier.

After a minute, Nash realized they were sharing a long-stemmed pipe, one puffing on it and then handing it to the other. *Are they smoking pot?* Nash muttered under his breath. Could things get any weirder? What were these two doing out here anyway? Were they part of a picket line? Would they be smoking and joking like that if they were? Nash shook his head. He briefly considered the possibility of simply bypassing this patrol, taking the cart way to the east to circle around them, but that simply placed them in danger of stumbling across another patrol. No, these two would have to be dealt with.

Standing up behind the tree, he used the starlight scope like a searchlight, viewing the surrounding plantation in sectors to determine if there were any other soldiers in the area. He doubted there would be, for

otherwise these two would show a little more military discipline, and indeed he saw no one. Convinced it was safe, Nash again knelt and aimed his rifle at the two men so he could observe them in the scope. Mentally calculating the angles and distance, he figured out a shooting solution, and found it dubious. The starlight scope didn't provide the pinpoint accuracy of his ART scope, and his first shot would disturb his sight picture enough that it would take at least a second or two to zero in for the second shot, by which time the remaining target could duck and seek cover. The suppressor, while reducing the flare and noise of the shot, did not totally eliminate them, which would alert the second target as to the source and direction of the first round. And that was assuming the first shot actually hit the first target and either killed or disabled him.

And in the total silence of the plantation, the action of his rifle, along with the clapping sound of the bullet leaving the barrel, would travel a long way, perhaps far enough to alert some other enemy patrol that Nash just couldn't see. What he needed was a distraction, a covering noise like the firefight earlier that had allowed him to shoot NVA without their noticing where the shots were coming from. And no sooner had Nash wished for that, than he heard the distant drone of an approaching aircraft. The propaganda plane was back.

As the plane's engine noise swelled into a roar, Nash adjusted his position. Sitting on his right heel, he pressed his left knee against the trunk of the tree and rested his left arm on his knee, his elbow just beyond his kneecap. Now the rifle was stable and steady in his hands, and he pulled the butt into his shoulder while he pressed his chin against the stock. The height of the starlight scope above the bolt housing group precluded getting a good stock weld on his cheek, but touching his chin to the stock was an acceptable substitute. He observed the two men through the scope, trying to decide which one to shoot first. He settled on the one farther away. The nearer one's initial reaction would probably be to turn toward the first target, giving Nash a wider area to aim at for his second shot.

The loud screeching music began again overhead, and Nash saw both men glance up, the nearer one bobbing his head along with the beat. He took a puff from the pipe and passed it to his buddy. As the second man sucked on the stem, Nash took a breath, let it half out, and gently squeezed the trigger. He felt the recoil, and barely heard the pop of the firing and the

clatter of the action as the shell casing was ejected and a new round driven into the breech. He regained his sight picture in time to see the far man fall backwards and lay there, his knees in the air, the pipe still in his hand. The nearer man, thinking his friend had simply lost his balance, pointed at him and laughed, his back heaving. But only for a moment. Nash pulled off another round, and the second man clutched at his side, tried to stand up, and then fell forward into the fire, snuffing it out with his torso. Wisps of smoke drifted up around the man's body, but nothing else moved.

Nash rose to a standing position, and again used the starlight scope to search down those lanes of trees he could see. There was no movement, and no figures other than Harv, Quan, and the cart several hundred yards back. His team showed no reaction. With the clamor from the propaganda plane, they apparently hadn't heard his shots, and that was good. He looked back at the two bodies. He couldn't leave them there in the open, he decided; if they were found by the enemy, it would make it obvious the sniper team was in the area, and which way they were headed. Reluctantly he jogged over to the little camp, which was only a few yards from the edge of the woods.

Leaning his rifle against one of the rubber trees, he squatted down and grabbed the ankles of the man who had landed on the fire, then straightened and dragged the lifeless form toward the forest. He was short and thin, even for a Vietnamese, and Nash quickly pulled him through the bordering brush and dropped him in a patch of high grass. Hurrying back out into the plantation, he did the same with the other man, although this one was plumper and required more effort. A third trip to the campsite was made to gather up their weapons and gear, which Nash dumped on top of the bodies. A final ground check to make sure he hadn't missed anything, and then Nash scattered the ashes of the doused fire and swept the dead leaves around to disguise the fact that there had ever been anyone there. He felt sure the bodies wouldn't be discovered for a couple days, when they began to stink.

Gathering up his rifle, Nash trotted back to join the rest of his team.

"They're down," he announced when he reached the cart.

"All of them?" Trey asked with a hit of doubt.

"There was only two. Let's go." Nash detached the starlight scope and gave it to Quan, then slid his rifle into the open bag and grabbed a table leg. Without a word, Harv grasped the other one, and Quan jogged ahead to get

some interval between him and the cart. A few seconds later they were on the move again. Nash didn't want to discuss the shootings, but he replayed them in his mind, trying to understand how he felt about them. He had caught them off guard, having fun and sharing a smoke, and that seemed a little unfair. But they had their rifles nearby, they were the enemy, and they threatened the lives of the team and the success of the mission. And yes, most importantly, he had just killed two fellow human beings, but somehow that didn't affect him as much as his religious background taught him it should. They certainly were not the first men he had killed, he observed, and maybe he was just getting inured to the deaths. But, he admitted grimly to himself, he had not been all that shook up the first time, either. And what did that say about him?

Their continued journey was like a bad dream, but one that was long and boring. They were traveling down an endless dark hallway lined with the grey sentinel tree trunks, with no end in sight, and nothing to break the monotony except occasional bushes or fallen tree trunks. And all the while they knew an enemy ogre could pop out from behind the trees and open fire on them. Surrounded by darkness, they were still openly exposed to anyone creeping through the night, ready to pounce on them. Nash remembered a short movie he had seen as a small child, one in which a mean mother sends her young daughter out to the store at night, despite the news reports that a black panther has escaped from the zoo. The movie ends with the mom staring at the front door, frozen and listening as the girl begs to be let in. Then the girl screams, and a puddle of blood seeps under the door. He had been terrified of black panthers ever since, and shivered as he realized one could be lurking here in the Michelin right now. Did they have panthers in Viet Nam? He wasn't sure. He knew they had tigers, which would be just as bad. He tried to shake off the unreasoning fear. Why be scared of panthers and tigers, when it was far more likely he would be killed by a gook with an AK?

At what Nash thought must be around three in the morning he whistled to Quan and stopped for a rest break. He needed a drink of water, and figured the others were equally tired and thirsty. Quan walked back to the cart, but continued to take frequent sweeps of their surroundings with the starlight scope. Nash sat down on one of the cart's tires and took short sips from his canteen.

“Where are we?” Trey asked groggily. He had been asleep, and Nash envied him.

“The Michelin,” Nash replied wearily.

“I know that, dickhead. Where in the Michelin?”

“Not in the good part.”

“What’s the good part?” Harv asked with only mild curiosity.

“There isn’t any,” Nash told him. “It all sucks.”

“Any idea how far we are from Dau Tieng?” Trey asked.

“Not really,” Nash said. “I’m pretty sure we’re still headed in the right direction, though.”

“That’s comforting,” Trey said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“The way I figure it, we keep going down this row some more, and at tree number one thousand seven hundred and thirty-two, we turn right.” Nash paused for effect. “You’ve been counting the trees, right?”

“Oh, sure,” Trey responded, playing along. “Only four hundred and twelve to go.”

“Good. Glad you’ve been staying awake.” Nash said that gently, without rancor, and Trey didn’t come back at him. Nash was glad Trey seemed to be doing better since they found the aid bag and dosed him up. He couldn’t really see Trey in the dark, but his voice was stronger and his attitude had improved.

Nash stood up and stretched, trying to get the kinks out of his shoulders and hands. Finally he took hold of the table leg and announced, “Break’s over. Quan, we’re right behind you.” Quan nodded and walked away. Nash noticed he was slower than he had been earlier, and realized the relentless pace and tension was getting to him just as much as to the Americans. Nash waited until Quan had disappeared in the darkness, and then pulled the cart bed level and along with Harv began dragging it down the never-ending passageway of rubber trees.

# FOURTEEN

Nash stumbled and nearly went to his knees, jerking the cart as he tried to catch himself.

“You okay?” Harv asked, stopping the cart so Nash could regain his balance.

“Yeah, just, uh, I don’t know.” Nash rubbed his eyes. The fact of the matter was that he had fallen asleep while walking, something he hadn’t previously thought possible. The Army had taught him to sleep sitting up, and even to nap standing if he had something to lean against, but while walking? That was new. He looked ahead, and realized he could just make out Quan’s figure about eighty yards ahead. It was starting to get light. He whistled at Quan and resumed pulling the cart forward.

The young Vietnamese looked back, his shoulders slumping, and stopped to wait for them to catch up.

“We need to find a place to hole up,” Nash said when they reached him. Quan nodded, and then rolled his head around to get the kinks out of his neck.

“Sun come up soon,” Quan noted, looking around. “This place look same-same.”

“Same as what?” Nash asked.

“Same-same before, four day ago.”

Nash rolled his eyes. “All the Michelin looks same-same. How can you tell?”

Quan just shrugged. “I find place,” he promised, and walked away.

“Does anything around here look familiar to you?” Nash asked Harv.

Harv shook his head. “Rubber trees, rubber trees, and more rubber trees. You seen one rubber tree, you seen them all.”

“I agree. But maybe Quan sees something we don’t, since he’s from

around here.”

“Yeah,” Trey joined in, “like invisible street signs or something.”

“He’s done all right so far,” Nash commented in support of the little soldier.

Well,” Trey agreed, “at least he thinks he knows where we are, which is better than us. We don’t have a fucking clue.”

“I’m so tired I don’t care,” Harv complained. “I need a nap.”

“Don’t we all,” Nash said. “Let’s go. Hopefully Quan’ll find some place soon.”

It was only a few minutes later that Quan again stopped and let them catch up to him. The atmosphere of the plantation had slowly shifted from pitch black to a dark charcoal grey, allowing Nash to see four or five rows of trees in every direction. Quan was pointing to a darker mass to the left, which Nash finally recognized as a large clump of bushes around a couple fallen trees. It looked vaguely familiar, but in the Michelin, everything looked the same as everything else.

“This our place,” Quan announced when Nash and the others arrived.

“It will work,” Nash nodded.

“No, same-same place, where we start,” Quan insisted.

“What?” Harv asked. “What do you mean?”

“He means this is where the mech guys dropped us off,” Nash said. “I guess it could be.”

“Yes,” Quan asserted. “See tracks?” He pointed at the ground, but it was still too dark for Nash to make anything out of the jumble of fallen leaves. But then he saw a tiny spot of white. He walked over and picked up the ball of paper and foil, unfolding it to reveal a cigarette pack. He remembered the soldier on top of the track throwing the pack away, and Nash’s brief concern about littering. This was, indeed, the rendezvous point they had been looking for.

“He’s right,” Nash said. “This is where the APCs left us. I can’t believe it. We’re actually where we’re supposed to be.”

“Blind fucking luck,” Trey said with a chuckle. “About time something

went right.”

“What’s the date today?” Nash asked with a start.

“Why, you got a doctor’s appointment?” Trey chided.

Nash went over to the cart and rummaged through one of the packs, pushing Trey to one side. He found a flashlight and clicked it on for just a second with it pointed toward the watch on his wrist. His Seiko had a day/date function, and the brief glare of yellow light showed him the tiny numerals.

“Today’s the fourteenth. That’s the day they’re supposed to come get us.”

“Yeah, but that was before,” Harv pointed out. “After we called in about the money, they changed it, didn’t they?”

“Maybe,” Nash admitted, “but when we didn’t show up, wouldn’t they go back to the original plan?”

“Who the fuck knows?” Trey complained from the cart. “But it’s possible.”

“Regardless,” Nash told them, “we’re worn out, and it’s going to be light soon. Let’s crawl back into those bushes and rest up. They were supposed to meet us here at noon. If they don’t show up, then we’ll keep moving and head on in to Dau Tieng. At least we know where we are now.”

There were no objections, so they headed to the dark clump of brush and pushed their way in to the center. Maneuvering the cart through the bushes and two fallen tree trunks without leaving a noticeable gap required some zig-zagging, but soon they were all ensconced deep within the clump, and Nash felt safer somehow, even though he knew the bushes provided little real protection. The logs, however, offered some security. One tree lay in a generally northwest to southeast angle, and the other north-south, creating an angular ‘fort’ with the intersection at the north end. The opening in the canopy had encouraged brush and grass to grow around and between the stumps, and vines had filled the spaces between the upper limbs of the two fallen trees. Within the semi-triangle of the logs the sniper team was surrounded by heavy foliage that made them virtually invisible from the rest of the plantation. Quan squatted down and took out a rice ball to gnaw on. Harv and Nash sat down on one of the fallen tree trunks and drank from their

canteens. Trey rolled off the cart and sat on one of the tires.

“Think we’re safe here?” Trey asked.

Nash shrugged. “I don’t think we’re safe anywhere in the Michelin. Not as long as we have all this cash.”

“I sure hope those mech guys show up soon,” Harv said wistfully. Nash wasn’t convinced they were even coming, today or any day, but he didn’t want to burst Harv’s bubble.

“Speaking of the cash,” Trey said, “maybe we ought to redistribute it.”

“How do you mean?”

Trey hesitated, and looked Nash in the eyes. “Uh, maybe we ought to put all the money back in the VC backpacks, and take it out of ours. It might look kind of funny when we get back to Dau Tieng, if we start searching our own backpacks for it.”

Nash nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Then we can just hand over the two packs and be done with it.” He retrieved the two nylon packs and unzipped them, while the other three started digging through their own packs and pulling out stacks of cash. Nash transferred the money from his own pack, and soon the two black bags were stuffed full again. Now totally exhausted, Nash sat back down on the log, and Harv dropped down beside him. Quan squatted down by the end of the cart and tried to keep from swaying back and forth.

“Why don’t you guys catch some Z’s?” Trey offered. “I’ve been riding around on this cart like Cleopatra, and I’ve been able to get some sleep, so I can stand guard.” He found his sniper rifle and propped the butt on one knee.

Nash welcomed the opportunity. The physical effort, the lack of sleep, and the constant threat of discovery had taken a real toll on him. He held out his hand toward Trey and said, “Twist my arm.” Trey smiled, and Harv just sighed. Nash unbuckled his web belt and draped it across the log, and then stretched his legs out and slid down to the ground, his shoulders and head resting on the rough bark. Beside him Harv did the same thing, and Quan almost fell over as he lay down on his side on the carpet of leaves and curled up in a fetal position. “Wake us up when our ride gets here,” Nash told Trey.

“Hey, look,” Trey said, “before you guys all pass out, there’s one more

thing.”

It would be another half hour of intense discussion before Nash was finally able to fall asleep.

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“And we’re supposed to be in the Michelin by 1200 hours?” Sergeant First Class Samples asked, clearly disgusted by the delay. He was standing in the middle of the road next to his platoon leader, First Lieutenant Carr. Behind them their platoon of four M-113 armored personnel carriers had dispersed, two on each side of the road facing outwards, ready to react to any ambush or assault from the neighboring woods. Ahead of them a squad of engineers was swinging mine detectors back and forth across the road, carefully checking every inch. Beside them a 5-ton cargo truck was tilted into a ditch, its left front wheel missing and the suspension mangled.

“We might be late,” Carr admitted.

“Anyone hurt in the truck?” Samples asked. He had been riding on the last track of the platoon, and had just joined Carr up at the front.

“Driver, but not bad, I don’t think.”

“Didn’t they sweep the road first?” Samples looked at his watch. It was after ten.

“Supposedly,” Carr answered. “But obviously not well enough.”

Samples took off his helmet and scratched his sweaty head. “Are they sure the snipers will be there?”

Carr shrugged. “The captain said they hadn’t heard from them for a couple days. Radio problems, they think. But the plan was for them to be where we dropped them off today at noon. Hopefully they’ll be there and stay there until we arrive, whenever that is.”

“Shit. At this rate, it might not be till tomorrow.”

“Now, now, Aaron,” Carr gently chided. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Patience my ass,” Samples complained. “I want to get back to Dau Tieng. There’s some beer at the NCO club just calling my name.”

Carr chuckled. He knew as well as Samples that the chances they would be released from duty long enough to go have a beer were slim and none. But it was nice to dream.

They watched the tedious slow progress of the engineers in silence, waiting for them to have gone far enough that they could bring the tracks back on the road and follow them a few hundred meters before again pulling off and setting up an outpost.

“What do you think about the idea of snipers?” Carr asked out of the blue.

“I wouldn’t want to do it,” Samples said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Too dangerous?”

“Not that so much. It’d be kinda lonely, and you’d have to be humping a lot of gear. Just doesn’t seem like much fun.”

“Not like this kind of fun, huh?” Carr asked with a smile.

“Hey, at least I haven’t got a ton of shit on my back, and there’s a small chance I can have a beer this evening.”

“I’m afraid ‘small’ doesn’t cover it. More likely no chance.”

“It’s still better than sleeping in the boonies, or in a rice paddy. I’ve done that enough.”

“Okay, so you wouldn’t do it, but do you think the idea of snipers has merit? Are they effective?”

“I guess so,” Samples said. “I mean, they wouldn’t do it if it didn’t help.”

“Are you saying,” Carr asked sarcastically, “that the Army never does anything stupid or impractical?”

“I guess not. They promoted you, didn’t they?”

Carr gave him a serious frown, and then they both laughed. These two men, officer and NCO, had developed a special bond of friendship that allowed them to make such jokes. They had saved each other’s lives when trapped behind enemy lines in the Crescent, and that special connection served them well.

Carr looked at the engineers, and then back at their platoon APCs.

“What do you think? Time to move ‘em up?”

“Might as well,” Samples answered, “can’t dance.” He raised his arm in the air and swung it in a circle, then pointed toward the engineers. Almost simultaneously the four engines roared to life and the tracks swung around and crept onto the road.

# FIFTEEN

Nash awoke to a gentle jostling of his shoulder and a low “Shhh!” He blinked his eyes to clear them, and raised his head. Trey was beside him, lying on his stomach with his XM-21 aimed across the top of the log next to which Nash had been sleeping. On the other side of Jefferson he could see Quan squatting while he brought the binoculars out of their case. “Wake up Harv,” Trey whispered to Nash.

Rolling over, Nash reached out and poked Albertson in the back. “Harv!” he hissed, “wake up.” Harv grunted and rolled over to face Nash.

“What?”

“We got company,” Trey told them quietly.

Nash grabbed his rifle and twisted his body around so he could point it over the log like Trey. Removing the lens caps, he brought his eye to the scope and swung it slowly in tight little circles until he found an opening in the foliage that gave him a view out into the plantation. At first all he could see were the orderly rows of rubber trees.

“NVA,” Trey whispered. “A shitload of ‘em.”

“Make ambush,” Quan added, looking through the binoculars.

Nash caught some movement in his scope, and focused in on it. Just beyond one of the farther rubber trees he could see two NVA soldiers digging a hole. He saw only glimpses of them, as nearer trees obscured his view. He was looking roughly northwest, diagonally across several lanes of trees, and the two men digging were at least a hundred yards away. More movement, and he raised his sight a little to detect more soldiers digging in, farther away, beyond the first two.

“How many?” Harv asked. He now had his M-79 grenade launcher, but without a scope or binoculars, he couldn’t really see anything.

“Company,” Quan answered succinctly. Nash knew that an NVA company was usually a lot smaller than a US Army company, but it still

meant at least eighty men. And that also meant they could have some heavy weapons, including light machine guns, a heavy machine gun or two, RPGs, and maybe even a mortar. This was a considerable force, especially in this situation. Dug in, in the Michelin where they had no fear of artillery or air strikes, they could easily surprise and overpower an American unit up to company strength. This was truly bad news.

Due to the heavy foliage around their hiding place, and the rows of trees beyond, it was difficult to see all the soldiers or determine exactly what they were doing. Nash finally decided they were setting up an L-shaped ambush, with the long leg beginning about eighty yards from the sniper team and stretching a couple hundred yards to the northwest, and the shorter leg angling to the southwest at the far end. It was an ideal arrangement to ambush any enemy force approaching them from the south. But when the mech platoon had dropped them off, he remembered, they had swept into this area from the west; if they came that way again, they would hit the ambush from the side. In that case, the NVA was set up entirely wrong, and would suffer accordingly, which improved Nash's mood. Nonetheless, if the mech platoon the snipers were hoping for showed up on schedule, they would still be driving into a firefight unawares. The team's lack of a working radio had just become even more of a handicap. They had no way to warn the GI's, and were virtually trapped within this patch of bushes by the closeness of the enemy.

Sunbeams glittered through the branches overhead, and Nash finally thought to look at his watch. It was just after ten, only two hours until the time when the mech platoon was supposed to meet them here.

"We gotta warn them," he told Trey urgently.

"How?" Trey replied. "Send up a smoke signal?"

Nash knew Trey was being sarcastic, but it made him think. "We've got smoke grenades. We could pop one in front of them."

"Yeah, but that would give away our position. And you'd have to run out into the open to throw it."

"Maybe I could do something with that ARVN radio," Harv suggested. "I'm thinking maybe I could bridge the connections on the mike socket and send out clicks like Morse code."

“Do you know Morse?” Nash asked.

“Well, I know SOS.”

Trey dismissed that idea. “How would they know it was coming from us, and what it really meant. And that’s assuming we were on the right freq.”

“Okay, okay,” Harv said dejectedly.

“But keep thinking,” Nash encouraged him. “We gotta come up with something.”

“And we’ve got time,” Trey noted. “If they’re coming, it won’t be for a couple hours.”

Nash detected a weariness in Trey’s voice, and looked over at the other man more closely. He could see that Jefferson was breathing in short sharp breaths, and sweating more than usual. “Are you okay?” he asked just loud enough for Trey to hear.

“Just tired,” Trey answered. “Don’t sweat it.”

Nash figured it was probably time to change Trey’s bandages and give him more medicine, but with danger lurking so close at hand, those efforts were simply not practical. He resumed observing the NVA preparations. So far he had not seen a heavy machine gun, but that didn’t mean they didn’t have one. Still, he thought, if this is the same group of NVA who ambushed the ARVN’s yesterday, their machine gun could have been damaged by the beehive round from the ARVN recoilless. It might be wishful thinking, but Nash decided to assume that was the case. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse through the trees of an NVA soldier waving his arms and giving orders. Although he wore the same non-descript uniform as the others, he was clearly an officer, and very much in charge. His bearing, his attitude, and the pistol on his hip marked him as the leader in a way that rank markings never could.

Nash centered the cross-hairs of his scope on the officer, and imagined pulling the trigger. But would taking out the leader disrupt the NVA operations enough to cause them to pull back? Probably not, he decided, and it would certainly lead to an attack on the sniper team, one they would surely not survive. It was always a matter of weighing the options, working out the possible outcomes, and finding the best course of action. But Nash was worn out. He had been making life and death decision for days now, and just when

he thought they were at the end of their mission and were soon to be safe and secure, the NVA had shown up again. He wasn't sure he had the mental and emotional strength to continue, especially with the situation suddenly looking so bleak.

"How did they know?" Harv asked quietly. "The gooks. How did they know to set up an ambush here?"

Nash had been mentally asking that question himself.

"They always know shit like that," Trey said. "If the Americans know it, then the South Vietnamese know it, and if the South Vietnamese know it, then the commies know it. We're the only ones in the dark here."

"Yes," Quan confirmed succinctly.

Nash had been sweeping up and down the front line of the ambush, observing how the enemy soldiers were quickly digging in and camouflaging their positions, but decided he needed to look farther afield, just in case. About fifty yards behind the main force, he could see two men digging a bigger hole, right in the middle of the lane between the trees.

"See those guys back there?" Nash asked. "Way behind the others, to our right? What do you think they're doing?"

"Digging a bunker for the officer?" Trey suggested, having swung his rifle to where he could see them through his scope.

"Mortar," Quan told them.

Nash studied the ground around the men, and over next to a tree he saw the mortar tube and a canvas bag bulging with mortar rounds. "Looks like a sixty mike-mike," he said. "Over by that tree to the left." The sixty millimeter mortar was pretty small, as mortars went, but it was easily transportable and effective against men in the open.

"Yep," Trey agreed. "Looks like they're digging a mortar pit. They'll be able to fire without exposing themselves at all."

"I haven't seen a fifty-one cal, have you?" Nash asked as he searched up and down the long leg of the ambush.

"Nope," Trey answered.

"Over there," Quan said. Nash looked up from his scope and over at Quan, who was pointing more to the left. Nash put his eye back to the scope

and slowly swept it across the plantation, nearly missing it as his field of vision slipped past it. Swinging back, he focused the scope and saw the menacing barrel of the heavy machine gun pointed almost directly at him. The communists had placed the gun in the middle of the short leg of the ambush, pointing almost parallel to the long leg, and putting any assault on the ambush line in defilade. It would be a deadly crossfire for the American unit caught in the ambush.

After about an hour the man they had decided was the officer in charge walked out about fifty yards to the south of the other men and turned to inspect the ambush site. He barked some orders, but he was too far away for Quan to make out what he was saying. Then he pointed to a couple places with further instructions and waited for the corrections to be made. Finally nodding with satisfaction, he rejoined his men and sat down to have a smoke. Nash could see other men come out of their fighting positions and relax as well. The ambush site was now ready, and the men only had to wait for the arrival of the victims.

Nash relaxed as well, insofar as he could relax under the circumstances. He wiggled his body to find a more comfortable position, but remained behind the log, his rifle lying across the top of it. He worried that some NVA soldier would wander over to their thicket, either out of simple curiosity, or perhaps for some privacy while he took a crap. The nearest enemy soldiers were almost a hundred meters away, and if they were highly disciplined men, they wouldn't stray that far from their prepared fighting positions, but anything was possible.

"What time is it?" Harv asked. He had his M-79 grenade launcher propped on the log, and Tony's M-16 beside him, while he continued to gaze out through the leaves and branches at the park-like plantation.

Nash glanced at his watch. "Eleven thirty," he answered.

"Those guys don't seem too worried," Harv noted.

"They'll hear the APCs long before they get here," Trey explained. "They'll have plenty of time to get ready for them."

Nash looked behind him, for reasons he couldn't explain. The cart, loaded with backpacks, had been covered with leafy branches and dead leaves, partially concealing it. Nash realized Trey must have camouflaged it while he and the others were sleeping, and he was appreciative of the effort it

must have taken for the wounded sergeant. Looking past the cart, Nash tried to see the open lanes of trees to the south and east, but the bushes that surrounded their hide gave him only narrow views of those panoramas.

“Quan,” Nash whispered loud enough for the young Vietnamese to hear. “Can you see anything in that direction?” He pointed to the areas to their right and behind them. Quan looked around, and then placed his AK across his forearms and low-crawled rapidly away, snaking over the other log and disappearing under the nearby bushes. Nash was amazed by how quickly the man could move, and how quietly. Five minutes later he reappeared behind Harv, having circled the border of the thicket, and crawled up between Nash and Trey to report.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. Still on his stomach, Quan then backed up a few feet, turned, and crawled back to his original location the other side of Trey. Nash and Trey exchanged looks of silent amazement. They had never met anyone who was so silent and efficient in his movements.

Looking over the top of the log behind which he lay, Nash could see the NVA still taking it easy. He watched as one man walked out in front of their perimeter and urinated on a rubber tree before returning to his prepared position, showing no signs of concern or anxiousness. Leaving his rifle on top of the log, Nash rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms and legs, trying restore circulation and ease the muscle cramps. “Doesn’t look like they’re expecting anyone soon,” he remarked casually.

Trey, who was lying mostly on his left side, due to the wounds on his right side, shifted more to his left and winced. “Son of a bitch still hurts,” he explained, lightly rubbing his thigh. “No, they don’t seem to think our guys will get here at noon.” He looked straight overhead, squinting his eyes at the patch of blue sky that was bright with the mid-day sun.

“But our guys are coming,” Harv said worriedly, almost as a question. “I mean, the gooks wouldn’t be out there if they weren’t expecting someone.”

“You’d think,” Trey replied. “Maybe our guys got caught in rush-hour traffic or something.”

Nash noticed how dry his mouth had become, and pulled out his canteen for a drink. It was steamy here in the thicket; the hot sun was evaporating all the water soaked into the ground and foliage from the recent rains. Sweat

trickled down Nash's face, and he wiped it with his sleeve, taking an opportunity to look at his watch again. It was almost twelve, and the Michelin was as silent as a graveyard.

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First Lieutenant Steven Carr watched the engineers load up their gear in a deuce-and-a-half and climb in after it. They had finally finished sweeping this section of the road, and had met another group of engineers who had been sweeping from the other direction. The road was now officially clear, and as soon as the engineers got out of his way, Carr could start his platoon moving again. He could see the Michelin in the near distance, its rows of trees beckoning with their welcome shade. When the trucks pulled away, he keyed the mike in his CVC helmet and simply said, "Yankee element, move out." His men were experienced and knew what needed to be done without a lot of explanation from him. Fred Aiello, the driver of this track, gunned the engine, making the track lunge forward down the road, the other three APCs following close behind.

They followed the road into the plantation for a quarter of a mile, before Carr had them turn left and spread out on line, one track in each lane of trees. The track on which Carr rode, A13, was on the left end of the line, and A11, carrying Sergeant First Class Aaron Samples, was on the right end, with A12 and A14 between. Just inside the plantation they all halted while Carr consulted his map.

This was their third trip into the Michelin within a week. They had made the initial insertion of the sniper team, and day before yesterday they had been ordered to return to that location, hoping to find the snipers waiting there. As before, they had operated like they were doing a RIF, and had stopped for "lunch" at the rendezvous site, but no one had shown up. Now they had been sent in again, with no assurances that anyone would be there this time either. Carr was worried that they had established a pattern that the enemy could have picked up on. The first time they had done the RIF in a box pattern, north from the road, then west to east to the drop-off point, continuing east a mile after the "lunch break" before going south back to the road. The next time they had run the pattern in reverse, east to west through

the area of the rendezvous. This time they were running late, so he would approach the location directly from the south, a shorter route, hoping any enemy in the area would be caught off guard.

He folded the map and put it away in his pants cargo pocket, and then checked his watch. The engineers had delayed them for nearly two hours, and it was already well past noon. Even if the snipers were at the RP now, they might give up and move before his platoon could get there. But there was nothing he could do about that, other than encourage his men to speed up the RIF. And that held its own dangers. The faster the tracks drove, and they could go up to forty miles an hour, the more likely they were to run into a bad situation without warning. While the higher speed made them less of a target for direct fire, it also meant they couldn't stop as quickly to react to any threat. It was a crap shoot, as always.

"Yankee element, this is three-three-tango," he said into the radio. "We're going to make it quick. Stay on line. Move out." Leaning forward from his seat on an ammo crate, he nudged Sergeant Montoya's shoulder. Montoya, sitting on the open driver's hatch cover, tapped Aiello on his CVC helmet, and Aiello stepped on the accelerator. The track leapt forward, and to his right Carr saw the others three vehicles also surge with a roar and plumes of black diesel smoke from their exhausts. On top of each was an undermanned squad of soldiers, all seated on ammo crates and cans strapped to the top of the boxy behemoths. Each man had his primary weapon in his hands, pointed up and down range, and none of them needed to hold on to the bucking APCs; they had been riding these vehicles for months, and like accomplished horsemen, they just rocked and rolled with the motion of the tracked vehicle, using only their feet for stability. It was like a cavalry charge through the plantation, the four APCs roaring down the lanes of trees at a rapid but steady pace, with everyone alert and ready to react to any unusual occurrence. Carr felt a surge of pride in his men, and the tingle of excitement brought on by the wild ride.

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"They are late." The lieutenant made the remark as he stood with Colonel Le watching the other NVA soldiers relaxing under the rubber trees.

The ambush was fully prepared, with dug-in positions that had been well camouflaged, and now the soldiers were relaxing, eating a meal or checking their weapons.

“Yes,” Colonel Le replied, not really interested in anything the lieutenant had to offer. Inwardly he was seething that he, a full colonel, was in charge of a company-sized ambush, an operation more appropriate for a mere captain. He knew that it was punishment for losing the shipment of money, but he felt it was unfair. It wasn’t he that lost the money, it was those two stupid South Vietnamese Liberation Army assholes. But the money had been his responsibility, and it was up to him to get it back. They had searched the Michelin for days, but the Yankees who had stolen the cash kept slipping away, even killing some of his men in the process. Worse, the South Vietnamese puppet soldiers had found out about it, and they were looking for the snipers as well and getting in his way.

The lieutenant tried again to start a conversation. “And we believe the Yankees who are coming today will meet with the snipers?”

“That is what our intelligence people tell us,” Le replied, hoping the lieutenant would go away.

“And how do they know this?”

“I don’t know!” Le barked angrily. “No one tells me these things! We have spies in the puppet government and their army, so I suppose that is how we know.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant said with a hint of apology. “I just wanted to know so I could be prepared. Do our intelligence comrades know where the meeting is to take place? Should we be looking for the arrival of the snipers?”

“No,” Le replied disgustedly. “We know nothing of any real use. We will ambush the Americans so they must withdraw without the snipers, and then we will look for them ourselves.”

“Ah,” the lieutenant said with false wisdom. He didn’t seem to really understand the logic, and frankly, neither did Colonel Le. But those were his orders.

One of the younger soldiers suddenly stood up and faced south, then turned and waved an alarm. Le heard it, too. The distant grumble of armored

personnel carriers.

“Everyone into position,” he shouted, and watched as the men disappeared into their foxholes and hasty bunkers.

“Where should I be?” the lieutenant asked nervously.

“Here, with me. We will demonstrate our resolution for the men by using only the trees for cover. They will see us and take heart in our bravery.”

The lieutenant’s face betrayed his fear, but Le didn’t care. Fear was irrelevant to the colonel. If he didn’t recover the money, his life was forfeit anyway.

# SIXTEEN

Nash heard the distant growl of diesel engines and started to say something, but saw from their reactions that the others had heard it, too.

“Here they come,” Harv whispered joyously. Nash nodded, and felt the first bubbling up of excitement in his chest. It was a combination of relief, fear, and anticipation for what was to come.

“We’ve got to warn them,” Trey insisted, but the expression on his face revealed his lack of a plan to do so.

“I could pop a grenade out in front of them,” Harv suggested.

“That would reveal our position,” Nash responded. “The gooks would know where we are, and our guys might think we were shooting at them and shoot back.” Harv looked crestfallen. “But keep thinking,” Nash amended, not wanting to discourage the man. He rubbed his forehead and tried to come up with a better idea, but nothing seemed to click. Meanwhile he twisted his body around and peered through his scope, trying to get his first look at the incoming vehicles. He assumed they would be armored personnel carriers, but for all he knew they could be tanks, or maybe just trucks. Looking across many rows of trees at an angle meant he couldn’t see very far, but he could certainly hear the growing rumble of the engines, and it sounded like they were moving fairly quickly. It also sounded like they were coming from the south, instead of the west as he had expected, and if so, they were headed directly into the middle of the ambush. He had wondered at the layout of the ambush, but apparently the NVA had successfully predicted the Americans’ line of approach.

His clearest and widest view was directly west down the lane of rubber trees their thicket was in the middle of, and when the GIs got that far, it would be the ideal time for the gooks to pop the ambush. They had to find some way to halt the Americans before they reached that point. So far, however, all he could see were the ubiquitous rubber trees with their spiral cuts in the bark and the pottery bowls wired to the trunks. And then it hit

him. He swung his rifle more to the left, aiming directly across Harv's front, and found the angle that let him see farthest through the rows of trees. The roar of the engines was getting louder and louder, and he could now determine their approximate location just by that sound.

"Get ready," he warned the team. He looked over the top of his scope and detected just a flash of olive drab to the south of where he was aiming. It was enough to determine that they were indeed APCs, and they were moving swiftly northward toward the deadly ambush. His eye back to the scope, he centered the crosshairs on one of the pottery bowls, took a breath, and gently squeezed the trigger. The suppressor reduced the report of the shot to a mere pop that was mostly drowned out by the noise of the oncoming tracks. Nash saw the bowl shatter, and then looked sharply to the right to see if his shot had elicited a reaction from the dug-in NVA. There was no reaction from that direction, but he heard the APC engines suddenly lose rpm and go to idle. Someone over there had seen the bowl break and had warned the others.

There were distant shouts and commands in English, and Nash caught fleeting glimpses of GIs jumping from the vehicles, spreading out, and taking cover.

"What's happening with the gooks?" Nash asked quietly while he continued to observe the Americans through his scope.

"Nothing yet," Trey answered. "The officer is hiding behind a tree, peeking around it, like he's trying to figure out why our guys stopped."

Nash saw one of the American soldiers pointing his rifle directly toward the thicket in which the sniper team was hiding, and realized how things must look to that guy. If he saw the reflection off Nash's scope lens, he might decide to start shooting at them. Quickly he swung the rifle back to the right, aiming down the line of hidden NVA soldiers. Aside from the idling diesel engines, the plantation was deathly quiet. The NVA didn't want to pop their ambush too soon, before the Americans were well within range, and the Americans weren't really sure what was going on, and didn't really have targets. The sniper team was in the most precarious position of all, however, because any gunfire coming from their location would probably bring return fire from both the NVA and the GIs.

"My flag," Quan said suddenly, and crawled over to the cart. Pushing

aside some of the branches, he began digging through the backpacks, and finally sat back beaming, the folded American flag clutched in his hand. Shaking the flag open, he started to crawl on his hands and knees toward the southeast side of the thicket, but Nash reached out and grabbed his ankle.

“Not you,” he said. “I’ll do it. They might think you’re a gook.” Leaving his rifle on the log, he took the flag from Quan and crab-walked through the brush until he was out in the open, then stood up and waved the flag back and forth with both hands, to keep it spread and clearly identifiable. He was on the far side of the thicket from the NVA ambush, but he was in full view of the Americans. The GIs would be tense and wary, and at this distance, they might shoot first and ask questions later, but Nash knew it was worth the gamble. They had to let the Americans know where they were, before the sniper team got caught in a crossfire.

Nash saw one of the soldiers step from behind a tree and wave back at him, shouting something to his buddies. Nash felt a surge of relief, glad that he had been recognized as a friendly. He made a patting motion with one hand, to indicate the soldiers should stay down, and then pointed across the thicket toward the NVA ambush, hoping the men would understand his gestures. As it turned out, his gestures were unnecessary.

The crack of a bullet split the air in front of Nash’s face, followed instantly by the distant sound of a rifle being fired, the bullet arriving before the sound of the shot. It came from his right. Apparently one of the NVA soldiers on the left end of the short leg of the ambush had seen the flag-waving and opened fire. Nash ducked back into the brush as a roar of gunfire erupted, seeming to come from all sides at once.

“Now you’ve done it,” Trey scolded Nash jokingly when he low-crawled back to the log and retrieved his rifle. Nash could barely hear him over the cacophony swirling around them, but he could tell Trey’s voice was scratchy, and his face was grey. Sharp snaps and pops of rifles, the chatter of light machine guns, the bass drumbeat of the heavy machine guns, and the pounding explosions of grenades melded into a symphony of deadly noise. Nash was surprised to note that few of the thousands of flying bullets seemed to be coming their way. A couple small limbs and leaf fragments drifted down from overhead, but the enemy was concentrating their fire on the American platoon out in front of them. Only one NVA soldier had been able to see him, Nash reasoned, and with the subsequent outbreak of gunfire, he

had not been able to relay that information to the others. So for now, at least, the sniper team was a card up the sleeve of the Americans.

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While he crouched behind the one-three track along with his radio operator, Earnie Eberhart, and his medic, John Allman, Lieutenant Carr's mind was racing as he considered all the options and possible outcomes. This mission had just drastically altered from what he had planned for, and the radio call from his platoon sergeant, Aaron Samples, received just seconds before the firefight broke out, really complicated his decisions. Now the din of constant gunfire from his men threatened to drown out even his thoughts, and occasional ricochets off the sides of the tracks and the pieces of bark flying off the nearby tree trunks provided plenty of evidence that the enemy was returning their fire. The enemy had even fired an RPG at them, but it had buried itself in the ground fifty feet in front of the tracks. That one shattered collecting bowl had stopped them well short of the ambush, but they were still close enough for the enemy to pin them down. And with what Samples had said, they couldn't just fall back.

"Doc!" Eberhart yelled over the roar, the handset of his radio pressed to his ear, "Rancy is hit!"

"Where is he?" Doc Allman made sure his aid bag was secure and his M-16 wasn't on safe.

"Inside one-four."

Allman sprinted away in a crouching run.

"How bad?" Carr demanded of Eberhart.

"Just his arm, I think," Eberhart answered with a shrug.

Unexpectedly, almost miraculously, Samples appeared beside them, having dashed over from the one-one track on the far right of their platoon formation through the hail of gunfire and arrived totally unscathed, and seemingly unperturbed.

"This is a pisser," Samples shouted in a conversational tone.

Carr frowned at him. "Aaron, you shouldn't be exposing yourself like

that.”

“Had to talk to you,” Samples said simply.

“We have radios,” Carr pointed out, nodding at Eberhart.

“So do they.”

Carr knew the sergeant meant that the enemy could be monitoring their transmissions, and while that was true, he didn’t believe it was a major concern in this situation. Nonetheless, he acknowledged the concern with a nod of his head. And now, at least, he would get an explanation of Samples’ earlier radio message indicating friendlies in the area.

“So who’s out there?” Carr asked.

“Our sniper guys,” Samples answered. “You see that bunch of bushes over there?” Samples pointed around the corner of the APC, and Carr leaned back enough to look beyond the nose of the one-two track thirty yards to the right, its fifty cal machine gun blasting away from the roof-mounted turret. He saw the clump of foliage that had grown up around a couple fallen rubber trees, and then quickly ducked back closer to the rear ramp of his track.

“They’re in there,” Samples told him. “One of them came out and waved a US flag at us, just before the shooting started. I recognized him. The guy with the funny name.”

Carr leaned back out enough to observe the clump for about thirty seconds, constantly aware he was risking a shot to the head. “They don’t seem to be taking any fire,” he commented when he pulled back.

“Yeah, I figure they’re right in line with the end of the gooks’ ambush positions. They’re okay for now, but we’ve got to keep drawing fire until we can pull them out.”

“And just how do you propose we do that?” Carr challenged him.

Samples shrugged. “You’re the officer,” he jibed with a grin.

“Gee, thanks,” Carr scowled at him.

“If I *was* an officer,” Samples offered, “I might advance the platoon slowly, edging over to the right. That way we could pick up the snipers and then roll up the ambush from this end.”

Carr nodded thoughtfully. It was a pretty good plan, although it brought

the platoon in range of the enemy's RPGs. No risk, no reward, he thought.

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Colonel Le angrily batted away the hot shell casings that spurted from the side of the RPD light machine gun. "Stop firing!" he ordered, and the gunner sheepishly complied. Le had squeezed into the tiny bunker when the American fire had rained down on the ambush, uncaring that he had violated his own orders. The lieutenant and the radio operator were pressing their bodies into the earth behind the bunker, which only rose about a foot high and provided dubious protection. The crack of incoming bullets was unmistakable, and the bark of nearby trees was being chewed up by the onslaught of flying lead. The ambush had not gone as planned, and Le had no idea why. The Americans had stopped before reaching the center of the ambush, and Le had initially hoped it was just a pause, ordering his men to hold fire until they got closer.

And then some idiot over on the right had fired a single round, and set off this chaos of a firefight. The Americans were too far for his RPGs, and his heavy machine gun's field of fire was mostly blocked by intervening rubber trees. He needed to bring the Americans closer, into the deadly embrace of his guns and rockets.

"Lieutenant!" he yelled out the narrow entrance to the bunker. "Tell the men to cease fire. And tell the mortarmen to open fire, and drop their rounds *behind* the Americans."

"Behind?" the lieutenant questioned in a quavering voice.

"You heard me! Do it!"

"Cease fire!" the lieutenant squeaked, then cleared his throat and yelled it again, this time with more authority. "Pass the word!" Up and down the firing line Le could hear the order relayed and the gunfire subside, at least on their side. He looked out the entrance and saw the lieutenant crawling away on his belly toward the mortar pit. He grimaced.

"Run, you coward!" Le yelled from the safety of the bunker. The lieutenant looked back, his eyes wide, and then squeezed them shut and jumped up to run like a rabbit. He stumbled, bumped into a tree, but kept

going until he disappeared when he dropped into the pit. Le suspected the lieutenant had been hit, but wasn't concerned, since the man had made it to the mortar and could pass on the order. Maybe he would give the lieutenant a medal later, if he survived.

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Nash had been surprised when an NVA soldier suddenly jumped up and began running to the rear. He had been aiming his rifle where he had last seen the officer, hoping to get a shot at him, but everyone had gone to ground. When that one man rose and raced to the rear of the enemy formation, Nash had instinctively followed him, his crosshairs leading a couple feet the way he had learned years ago when hunting deer. He snapped off a shot and saw the man stagger a moment, bounce off a tree, and then continue forward to fall into the mortar pit Nash had seen being dug earlier.

"Harv, Quan, don't shoot yet," Nash reminded them. While he and Trey could get away with firing their suppressed sniper rifles, any fire from the other unsilenced weapons would surely bring hellfire down on them, not only from the NVA, but possibly from the GIs on their left. Nash was pretty sure at least one man had seen him waving the flag, but could not be sure that all the men in the platoon had gotten the word. When he looked up from his scope to ensure that Harv and Quan had heard him, he saw with alarm that Trey's head was drooping, and his eyes were closed. He still gripped his rifle, but was no longer peering through the scope.

"Trey! You all right?"

The young black man raised his head and slowly opened his eyes. "Uh, yeah. Just had to rest my eye a minute. You know." He again pressed his forehead to the scope, but Nash could detect a tremble in his right hand.

On the other side of Trey, Quan gave Nash a questioning look, and Nash could only shrug. Trey needed attention, but right now they simply couldn't provide it.

"What are they doing?" Harv asked.

Nash was about to give a sarcastic response when he noticed why Harv was concerned. Gunfire from the NVA was diminishing as shouted orders

were passed along the line. As the orders reached the men closest to the sniper team's position, Nash could almost make out the words. He looked over at Quan for a translation.

"They stop fire," Quan told them. "Maybe they retreat now?"

The fire from the Americans also eased, and although it didn't stop, the reduction was enough for Nash to hear the distinctive 'whump' of a mortar being fired. There was a two second pause, and then a crunching explosion off to his left, behind the mech platoon. Immediately after there was another mortar round fired.

"They're way long," Harv commented as the second mortar round crashed to the ground behind the Americans. A third mortar round exploded near the top of a tree, still far back from the APCs.

"They're driving them forward," Trey croaked. "So they'll be in range of the RPGs."

And it seemed to be working. The armored personnel carriers began inching forward, their fifty-cals pouring lead ahead of them, the dismounted soldiers following in short crouching runs before flopping down to earth again. But then the vehicles began angling toward the thicket where the snipers hid. Nash didn't understand, but he certainly hoped the American platoon leader had a good plan. He put his eye to the scope again, hoping to see the NVA fleeing from their prepared positions, but the only movement he saw was a single man emerging from a bunker and taking shelter behind a tree while he shouted and waved his arms. It was the officer.

Nash took a deep breath and exhaled most of it, adjusted his head to give him a good stock weld and an ideal sight picture, gripped the fore stock loosely as he adjusted his aim, and gently pulled the trigger back. The rifle jerked up in his hands from the recoil, but he quickly brought it back down and focused on the enemy officer. The man stopped moving, but still stood with his back pressed against the tree trunk, and Nash feared he had missed. But, as he prepared to take another shot, the man's knees bent and he slid down the trunk to a sitting position, before falling to one side and lying there without moving. Just to be sure, Nash aimed at the man's head and pulled off another round. The man's pith helmet flew off in a spray of blood. He was definitely dead now.

"Good shot," Trey said weakly. His head was still pressed to the sight

on his rifle, but his hands were visibly trembling, and his breath came in short gasps. Although rescue seemed close at hand, Nash worried Trey might not make it that long. It was frustrating to not be able to do more to help Jefferson, or to speed up the arrival of help.

Beyond Trey, Quan had the binoculars and was watching the NVA positions intently. “They not shoot back,” he said in puzzlement. Nash put his eye back to the scope and swept it up and down the NVA line. Indeed, there seemed to be no activity there.

“Maybe they’re still waiting for our guys to get closer,” Harv suggested.

“Or waiting for orders,” Nash said. “I zapped their officer just now.”

“You did? Cool.”

Nash looked over at Harv, intending to say something else, but it flew out of his mind as a flicker of movement drew his attention. Someone was approaching the thicket from the south, running from tree to tree. “Behind us!” Nash warned Harv.

# SEVENTEEN

Samples pressed his shoulder to a rubber tree, the collecting bowl digging into his thigh, and caught his breath. Frankly, he was surprised he had made it this far without being shot, or even shot at. The gooks were uncharacteristically restrained at the moment. He felt a little safer now, since the clump of bushes provided some concealment from the enemy positions, insofar as he could figure out where the NVA soldiers were dug in. He took a quick peek around the tree at the mound of brush, and recoiled when he saw the glint of reflection from a telescopic sight deep within the foliage.

“Don’t shoot!” he yelled. “I’m on your side.”

“Who are you?” someone called back.

“Sergeant First Class Samples. I’m coming in.”

“Come ahead.”

Samples rounded the tree and darted into the bushes, barreling his way through the branches and vines until he burst into a small clearing bordered by two fallen trees, where he collapsed next to a two-wheeled cart parked among four men just as bullets began to whip through the air above them.

“They know we’re here now,” one of the men complained.

“Sorry,” Samples apologized.

An increase in the gunfire from the Americans caused a sudden cessation of the rounds passing overhead.

“That helped,” one of the other men said. Samples looked around at the four men, who he recognized from five days earlier, although he had forgotten their names. The soul brother—Washington?—looked bad, shaking and grey. The Hispanic guy with the sniper rifle still looked pretty sharp, and appeared to be in charge. On the left was the big guy with the M-79, and on the far right was the Chieu Hoi, holding binoculars in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. Samples stared for a moment at the cart, which looked like an upside-down kitchen table mounted on small car wheels, piled

high with backpacks.

“Weren’t there five of you guys?” Samples asked over the din of the continuing firefight.

“One’s dead,” the Hispanic guy said. He turned to face Samples, and now Samples could read his name tape, although he wasn’t sure he could pronounce it correctly. “We buried him,” Jaramillo said. “I’ve got his dog tag.”

“And him?” Samples asked, nodding toward the brother.

“Trey’s wounded, can’t walk. We need to get him medevacked.”

The black soldier raised his head at the mention of his name and nodded. “It’s not too bad,” the man gasped bravely, but Samples could see that he was far worse than he admitted.

Samples got down to business. “How many gooks are there, do you know?”

“Around eighty,” Jaramillo told him. “A fifty-one cal, a couple RPDs, a sixty-one mike-mike mortar, and a bunch of RPGs.”

“Holy shit!” Samples blurted. “That’s damn near a whole company.”

“Roger that,” Jaramillo confirmed.

Samples quickly put two and two together. He nodded at the sniper rifle. “Did you shoot that bowl?”

“Yeah,” Jaramillo answered. “Had to warn you guys about the ambush.”

“Good job,” Samples praised him. “Saved our asses, for sure. So why have they stopped firing?”

“Don’t know for sure,” Jaramillo said.

“Maybe want you guys to get closer first,” the big guy said. Samples now saw that the man’s boonie hat had “Albertson” written on it in ball-point pen.

“Nash kill officer,” the Chieu Hoi piped up. Samples wondered who Nash was, then remembered it was Jaramillo’s first name. Jaramillo tilted his head in a self-deprecating manner.

“He was out in the open, giving orders,” Nash explained. “So I took a shot.”

“So who’s in charge now?” Samples wondered. Jaramillo just shrugged.

“Oh, shit,” the black guy—Jefferson, Samples now remembered—croaked. They all turned to see what Jefferson was looking at. Samples saw the red flare streaking through the trees on a low trajectory, having come from somewhere behind the NVA line. It hit a tree just in front of the one-four track and bounced back to splutter in the fallen leaves. The NVA responded to the signal gradually, as if they weren’t expecting it, but soon there was a soaring crescendo of gunfire. Bullets snapped through the leaves of the thicket and thunked into the logs, forcing Samples and the others to flatten themselves on the ground. He could hear the engines of the APCs lose rpm and go to idle, and then he heard the distinctive whoosh-bang of an RPG.

Jefferson’s rifle popped, and then the man moaned, “Missed, damn it!” Samples looked over at him, and was surprised he’d even been able to pull the trigger, as weak as he appeared.

Jaramillo swung around and aimed his own rifle over the log. “Where is he?” he asked Jefferson. Samples was surprised by Jaramillo’s dedication and courage, and felt a slight glow of pride in his fellow soldier. He crawled over to the log himself, taking a position to the left of Albertson, and peered over the sights of his M-16, searching out a target. Albertson fired his M-79, and Samples saw the grenade explode between two distant rubber trees, sending leaves and dirt up into the air. An NVA soldier who must have been directly behind the explosion jumped up, clutching his face, and Samples quickly aimed and fired his M-16 three times on semi-automatic. He was gratified when the blinded man jerked and collapsed.

Closer to the men in the thicket, Samples saw a man pop up out of a foxhole with a loaded RPG launcher and kneel to aim it toward the APCs. He quickly brought his rifle to bear on the man, but not as quickly as Jaramillo, whose rifle snapped once and sent the RPG gunner sprawling. When he hit the ground, the dying man jerked the trigger, and the RPG round skittered across the ground like a Fourth of July whistling chaser, scattering dead leaves as it headed toward Samples’ platoon. But then it hit one of the rubber trees a glancing blow and ricocheted to the right, gaining altitude in the process, and arced toward the far end of the ambush line, finally curving down and exploding.

“It hit big machine gun,” the Chieu Hoi shouted with glee. He still had the binoculars clutched to his face, his AK-47 lying next to him.

Another RPG round flew from the far end of the line, sparking and smoking toward the four APCs, only to fall short and explode well in front of them. Samples looked over at the cart that was covered with leaves and branches. “What’s the deal with that?” he asked.

“It’s how we’ve been transporting Trey,” Jaramillo explained. “It’s got all our gear on it. Plus some stuff we got from the gooks. They want it back.”

“What kind of stuff?” Samples inquired, squinting at the bags piled on the cart.

“Money,” Albertson answered, and Samples saw Jaramillo shoot him a warning look.

“We’re not supposed to talk about it,” Jaramillo improvised. “But Higher really wants us to bring it in.”

Samples could tell from Jaramillo’s tone that the young man did not want to discuss it further, and Samples respected that. Also, he decided he really didn’t want to know.

“I got to get back,” Samples told the others. “You guys are okay for now. We’ll come get you as soon as we can.” Staying low, Samples duck-walked through the fringe of foliage into the open plantation, and then took off at a run for the one-one track. He had to get on the radio and report to the lieutenant what was happening.

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Nash couldn’t help feeling abandoned when the sergeant left. While he understood the necessity, that brief connection to the rest of the Army had been a tremendous relief. Setting aside his feelings, Nash pressed his eye to his scope and sought another target.

“RPG!” Harv yelled, and fired his grenade launcher. Nash looked up to see where Harv was pointing, only to see the grenade explode far beyond the RPG gunner who had popped out from behind a tree about two hundred yards

away. Swinging his rifle around, Nash tried to get it focused on the man, but it was too late, and the rocket spewed flame as it launched toward the APCs. Finally getting the crosshairs centered on the man's back, Nash squeezed the trigger, but just as the hammer clicked free, a bullet slammed into the log in front of him, jarring his aim enough that his shot totally missed. The man with the launcher tube darted for cover, and Nash pulled off two more quick shots, missing and cursing himself for not leading the running man.

"They're pulling back," Trey croaked, and then coughed several times.

Nash raised his head from the scope and searched the spaces between the trees where the NVA had dug in, but saw no one moving. Was Trey starting to hallucinate? He glanced over at the man, but saw Jefferson wasn't looking to their northwest, but instead off to their left. Following Trey's gaze, Nash saw that the armored personnel carriers were backing up slowly, and GI's were jumping up and running back to take cover behind them.

"They're leaving?" Harv yelped in consternation. "What about us?"

"They're getting out of RPG range," Nash reassured him. "They won't leave us behind." He sincerely hoped that was true. An explosion just in front of the withdrawing APCs showed that the mortar, which had been strangely silent for a few minutes, was back in action. "Where is that fucker?" Nash muttered to himself. He repositioned his rifle until it bumped into Trey's, and Trey weakly drew his rifle back out of the way.

"Quan! Where's the mortar?" Nash had his eye to the scope, but couldn't see anything but trees and leaf-covered ground.

"There!" Quan answered, stretching out his left arm and pointing almost directly north.

Nash aimed in that direction, the image in his scope blurring as he moved it rapidly in ever-widening circles to locate the hidden mortar pit. A small round object flitted through the limited circular scene, and Nash stopped and went back. There it was again. An NVA pith helmet bobbed up from a hidden hole, like a fish breaching the surface of a stream, and disappeared again. Nash could almost see the disturbance in the air as another mortar round was launched from below ground level. Quickly adjusting the focus of the scope, Nash kept it trained on the almost invisible position, and as he had hoped, the helmet again rose into view. This time it went higher, revealing a face beneath it; probably the man was looking to see

where the latest round had impacted. Shutting out all the noise and activity around him, Nash steadied his hands and gently squeezed the trigger, so slowly he was surprised when the gun actually went off. He re-aligned the scope with the target just in time to see the man's head jerk back and disappear into the hole.

There was no other visible activity at the mortar pit for a minute, but no other rounds were launched either. Nash kept his scope focused on the site anyway, and was soon rewarded for his patience. A limp body was being pushed up out of the hole, its arms and legs flopping around and interfering with the process. Finally Nash saw another soldier stand up to hurriedly pick up the body and fling it away from the pit. The man wasn't quite fast enough, however, and Nash fired again. The man threw his hands up in the air, dropping the body, and fell backwards into the hole. Nash knew that the usual mortar crew was comprised of two men, so the mortar now, in theory, was out of action.

A rapid series of hollow thumps reverberated through the log, so Nash ducked down, pulling his rifle with him as he sought shelter from the automatic fire now directed at their hide. Trey lay beside him, his eyes closed and his breathing shallow.

"Damn!" Harv cursed behind him. "That was close."

Nash wondered what the mech platoon was doing, but wasn't about to raise his head above the log right now, as bullets continued to hit the log and zip through the branches around them. It was hard to tell over the constant roar of gunfire, but it seemed like the tracks had stopped falling back. For now, he knew, it was something of a stalemate, with the two sides pounding each other at long range, neither able to gain an advantage. The Americans were outnumbered by a well dug-in enemy, but had superior firepower in the form of their four fifty caliber machine guns. Due to ridiculous political restrictions, however, the Americans could not call in artillery or air support to dislodge the NVA. On their part, the NVA were protected by their underground positions, but in a sense were trapped there, unable to fall back or maneuver without taking heavy losses. Nash assumed that the American platoon leader had requested reinforcements, but who knew how long it would be until they arrived? And perhaps the NVA commander, or whoever was in charge there now, had also requested additional forces.

And where did that leave the sniper team? They were more than mere observers or spectators, since they were capable of actively participating in the battle, but their position in this thicket left them vulnerable to an enemy assault or even being surrounded, should the Americans have to withdraw farther. Nash pondered the advisability of attempting to make a run for the mech platoon, but a quick glance at Trey made that clearly impossible. Even if they could get him back on the cart without all of them getting shot, pulling the cart through the plantation would make them such easy slow-moving targets that they would be down before they made it ten yards. They could only withdraw when the American forces had pushed past them and provided a shield from the enemy fire. Nash was confident that the U S Army would certainly prevail over the North Vietnamese Army, at least in this instance, but was worried about what could happen to the sniper team meanwhile. And then he heard the rumble off to his right.

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Lieutenant Carr climbed out of the personnel door at the back of the one-three track to rejoin his RTO, Eberhart, who was huddled close to the back of the vehicle for protection. Carr had been using the vehicle's larger radio to confer with Battalion about their situation. They said they were sending Bravo Company to assist, but it would be at least an hour before they arrived. Meanwhile, he was told, they were contacting the MACV people to see if any ARVNs or ruff-puffs were available. Carr knew that even if any ruff-puffs were around, they would be of little help. The Regional Forces-Popular Forces were technically the equivalent of the American National Guard, but in reality they were just farmers who had been given old guns and partial uniforms, with minimal training. And the ARVNs had a mixed reputation.

Eberhart held the handset to his backpack radio out for Carr to take. "It's Free," he informed Carr. "Free" was the platoon's nickname for Sergeant Samples, but one they never used to his face.

"This is Tango, go," Carr spoke into the mike, wanting to keep it brief.

"Our guys are there, one of them is wounded," Samples reported. "Can't walk, over."

“Roger,” Carr told him. “Help’s on the way, but not for a while. Break. Any way we can exfiltrate them? Over.”

“Exfiltrate. God, I love that word.” Carr could detect Samples’ grin in the way he said it. “But no, not right now. They’ve got a lot of stuff on a cart that needs to come out with them. Over.”

Carr paused. Then he pressed the key on the handset and said, “Roger, I’m aware of the stuff. It’s imperative that we retrieve the men AND their stuff, over.” Carr had been told about the money, but was under strict orders not to pass that on to anyone, including his platoon sergeant.

“Imperative,” Samples radioed back. “Another good word. Yeah, they told me about the stuff. Wait one!” The last was spoken with a real sense of urgency, and Carr looked past the one-two to where he could just see the back end of the one-one track, wondering what was going on down there. The radio crackled as Samples again keyed his mike.

“Someone’s coming from the east. Sounds like tracks, over.”

“El-tee,” Aiello yelled from inside the track. “Battalion’s calling.” Carr tossed the handset back to Eberhart and ducked inside the track to put his head next to the radio speaker, the porkchop mike clutched in his hand. He was hoping they were going to tell him who was coming to their aid.

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The NVA lieutenant tried again to shove the mortarman’s body away from him, but it kept falling back to lean against the lieutenant’s shoulder, its head dripping blood onto his uniform. The other mortarman’s body was draped on the edge of the mortar pit. The lieutenant’s calf throbbed from the bullet wound he had suffered when running to the pit; he had wrapped it as best he could, but the bandage was soaked with blood.

Colonel Le was dead—no big loss, the lieutenant thought—and the radio operator was God knows where. So ostensibly he, a mere lieutenant, was in charge of this company, having been handed the command by bad fortune in the middle of a huge firefight. He had no idea what he should do next. The men, at least, seemed to be responding well, firing on the Americans whenever the opportunity arose, and not trying to escape the onslaught. In

fact, the Americans had pulled back, which gave the lieutenant hope that he might survive.

He pushed the body away again, harder, and finally it tilted over and fell at the feet of the other body. Using his good leg, the lieutenant crawled up the side of the pit and peeked over the berm, assessing the situation. The Americans had stopped retreating, but neither were they advancing. They held steady in a line to the south, their heavy machine guns maintaining a steady suppressive fire. The lieutenant ducked down just as bullets whizzed over the top of the pit. He knew he should go forward and encourage his men, but he also knew it was suicidal to do so, especially with his wounded leg. Racked with indecision, he just huddled at the bottom of the mortar pit and felt sorry for himself. Then he, too, heard the sound of engines, this time from the east, and a wave of despair washed over him. Now they were well and truly fucked.

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“ARVNs!” Quan yelped, pointing excitedly to the northeast. Nash peered through the surrounding branches and leaves and caught a brief flash of an M-113 armored personnel carrier. The APC had a small red-and-yellow South Vietnamese flag flying from its radio antenna and a crowd of soldiers riding on top. It was rolling forward at a steady pace, not too fast, but not really slowly either. Flitting through the trees Nash could see at least two or three more tracks on line with the first. They were aimed directly at the back of the NVA ambush. Things were about to get extremely complicated.

“Everybody get way down!” Nash yelled. “The shit’s gonna hit the fan now.”

And he was right. When the ARVN tracks reached the north-south lane of rubber trees in which the sniper team hid, they stopped long enough for the mounted soldiers to jump off and form an assault line between the APCs, and then all began marching forward. The machine guns on the tracks opened up, and the dismounts began firing sporadically with their carbines. One of the tracks had a recoilless rifle mounted on it, and with a loud bang it fired toward the NVA as well. Nash wondered if this was the same unit they had

watched fight the NVA the day before. Or was it perhaps commanded by the ARVN officer who wanted the money? It was probably, he knew, one and the same. Regardless, they had come to the rescue, and with the Americans here as well, the sniper team was relatively safe.

Looking to his left, Nash saw that Sergeant Samples' platoon was again creeping forward, their guns blazing and M-79 grenades arcing toward the NVA and exploding between the trees. He wondered if the Americans and the ARVNs were coordinating by radio, or were simply proceeding independently in the most logical way under the circumstances. Either way, it was devastating for the NVA. Their foxholes and bunkers were oriented toward the Americans, and they had little protection against the attack from their left rear by the ARVNs. Muzzle flashes told Nash that some of the NVA soldiers had turned around and were firing at the ARVNs from the back entrances of their dug-in positions, and he saw a soldier launch an RPG that way, with predictably disastrous results. The back blast of the rocket, deflected by the walls of the bunker, washed back over the gunner, blowing off his helmet and setting his hair on fire. Nash quickly took aim at the man, who was screaming and flailing his hands at the back of his head, and put him out of his misery. He glanced to his right, to see if the RPG had found its target, but the rocket propelled grenade had already exploded somewhere behind the ARVNs.

A loud "plonk" from beside him told Nash that Harv had joined the battle with his M-79, and on the other side of Trey he could hear Quan firing Tony's M-16. Trey was firing his XM-21 every couple seconds, but Nash saw that both of the wounded man's eyes were closed, his head resting on the stock for support. He was just shooting for the sake of shooting, unable to actually direct the fire toward specific targets. Nash worried that this firefight wouldn't end soon enough to get Trey the medical attention he needed.

Back on his scope, Nash sought more targets. Unexpectedly a soldier popped out of the ground, from a position so well camouflaged that Nash had been unaware of its existence. The man had no weapon, and immediately began running to the northwest, away from both of the attacking mech platoons. As he neared the mortar pit, another man stood up from the pit and waved his arms angrily at the man, and then drew his pistol. Without hesitation Nash put the crosshairs on the man with the pistol and fired, noting

with satisfaction that the man dropped the pistol, clutched at his chest, and fell back in the hole. Nash quickly got the running man in his sight, but mentally shook his head. The man was unarmed and fleeing and Nash felt sympathy for the man's predicament. Since he was no longer a threat, Nash let him go.

The American APCs were now closing to within a hundred meters of the nearest NVA positions, and the ARVNs had stopped about one hundred and fifty yards away, but still maintaining a heavy rate of fire. The American and ARVN lines were at right angles to each other, with the sniper team located where those lines would intersect. The NVA line bisected this angle, starting not far from Nash and the others and stretching out to the northwest. The NVA position was clearly untenable, and it appeared the individual NVA soldiers were increasingly aware of the problem. Two NVA soldiers crawled out of their foxhole at the southeast end of the line, the one closest to the American and ARVN assaults, waving something white and holding their hands up. They had barely stood up when they were cut down, spinning away from a hail of machine gun fire that Nash was sure had come from the ARVNs.

"That wasn't necessary!" Nash muttered out loud. Other NVA soldiers came out of their holes, some attempting to surrender, and others running away. The gunfire from both the Americans and the ARVNs continued, and Nash saw some of the men fall, others cower next to trees, and a lucky few escape the maelstrom, disappearing through the trees, headed for the nearby wood line of the forest.

"They're done," Harv said with finality. His ears ringing from all the gunfire, Nash could barely hear him. Harv rolled over on his back and blew down the open barrel of his weapon. Then he took a deep breath and put his head back, resting with the open M-79 on his chest. Trey, having emptied his magazine, had slid off the log and laid on his side, facing away from Nash, his hand fumbling unsuccessfully to remove the empty clip. Quan still pointed the M-16 toward the NVA, but had stopped firing, his expression a mixture of disgust and pity. Outside the thicket the roar of the firefight was dying as the ARVNs resumed their push forward, and the Americans came level with the sniper team. Nash let out a long whistling breath. The battle was over. Now came the hard part.

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“On my way,” Samples barked into the porkchop mike, and then tossed it to Hicks, who was crouching on the much-diminished stacks of 50-cal ammo cans. The platoon sergeant was inside the one-one track, and beside him the squad leader, Art Jamison, waited for orders. Although Jamison had probably heard the entire radio conversation, Samples repeated some of it just to be certain. “As soon as Doc Allman gets here, we’re heading over to that clump of bushes where the snipers are. The lieutenant is taking the rest of the platoon after the gooks. We’ve got to collect the snipers, especially the wounded one. I’m going on ahead; you stay with the squad, follow me, and watch out for the ARVNs.” He and Jamison had been working together for several months, and he felt certain Art understood what he meant about the ARVNs. The squad members needed to avoid shooting at the ARVNs, but also be wary about the ARVNs shooting at them.

Picking up his M-16, Samples ducked out the personnel door at the rear of the track, took a brief look around, saw Doc Allman running up, and together they ran toward the sniper hide. Off to his left he could see the rest of the platoon moving swiftly forward in pursuit of the fleeing NVA, and on the far side of the bushes he saw the ARVN APCs, also pursuing, but at a more leisurely pace. With his helmet bouncing on his head, and leaves crunching under his feet, he jogged to the thicket and pushed his way inside, announcing himself with a hollered “Yo, it’s me.” He told Allman to wait at the edge of the bushes to guide the track in. He found Jaramillo and the Chieu Hoi kneeling on either side of the black sergeant, Jefferson, and Albertson sitting on the log drinking from his canteen. The Chieu Hoi was tipping a canteen to Jefferson’s mouth, while Jaramillo was apparently checking the wounded man’s temperature by holding his hand on his forehead.

“Track’s coming,” Samples told them. “We need to get him out of here.”

“We’ll use the cart,” Jaramillo said, rising to his feet. Albertson put his canteen away and came to stand by Jaramillo. “Quan, will you hold the cart, please?”

At least now Samples knew what the Chieu Hoi’s name was, but he was

a little puzzled by Jaramillo's respectful request. He didn't have time to ponder it, however, and went to help Albertson and Jaramillo lift Jefferson up, while Quan grabbed at table leg and brought the bed of the cart level.

"Watch out for his right thigh and back," Jaramillo warned Samples. "They're pretty sore."

Carefully they raised Jefferson, who was now moaning and groaning with pain, and gently placed him on top of the backpacks that filled the cart. Albertson laid his M-79 on the cart next to Jefferson, and then took the table leg from Quan so the Vietnamese could gather up his own weapons, an M-16 and an AK-47, to lay them on the other side of Jefferson. Quan then took the other table leg in hand, and nodded that he was ready. Jaramillo picked up the two XM-21 sniper rifles and took a position behind the cart. He nodded to Samples that all was ready.

"Let's go," Samples said, and led them out of through the bushes into the open spaces of the plantation. The one-one track was there waiting for them, and when they emerged from the bushes, Gunn, the driver, released the rear ramp. The wide metal slab, which comprised the entire rear of the machine, arced out and fell to the ground with a metallic thump. Doc Allman, who had been standing beside the track, rushed over and immediately started checking Jefferson out before the cart even stopped rolling.

"I'm making a place for him," Jamison yelled from inside the track. Samples could hear things being thrown around inside. He also heard the sound of an approaching diesel engine, and looked over to see one of the ARVN papa-charlies rolling up. It stopped about thirty yards away, and a man in a very neat tailored uniform scrambled down from behind the driver. Four or five other ARVN soldiers trotted up and took positions on either side of the track, their carbines held at port arms. Samples wondered what was going on.

At Allman's direction, Albertson and Quan, along with Jamison, gingerly carried Jefferson into the one-one track, leaving Samples and Jaramillo beside the cart to warily greet the ARVN soldier who was coming toward them. Up in the machine gun turret Spec 4 Greenberg pretended to check out the 50-cal while surreptitiously watching the scene unfolding below him. The other three members of the squad, Hicks, Sweet, and

Crosby, had spread out around the track to provide nominal security. Crosby had no shirt on, and a red-spotted white bandage was wrapped around his left arm. Samples briefly wondered when that had happened, but was more worried about what was going on right now.

When the ARVN got closer, Samples saw the double bars on his collar that indicated a captain. Reflexively he straightened his back and saluted, although he felt no real respect for the little guy, whose expression was a little disturbing. He was smiling, but his eyes registered different emotions—anger perhaps, or excitement? He returned the salute with a quick flutter of his hand.

“A good day, eh, sergeant?” the captain said in very good English with only a slight accent. “Together we have vanquished the enemy.”

“I guess so, sir,” Samples answered warily.

“And you have found the missing snipers, I see. Very good.” The captain, whose name tape read Nguyen, like virtually every other ARVN Samples had ever met, looked over at the cart, his eyes gleaming and a slight smile curling the edges of his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye Samples saw Jaramillo shift his body over to be directly between the captain and the cart. He wondered what that was about, and noticed Captain Nguyen’s face cloud over at the intrusion.

“You are in luck, Sergeant,” Nguyen said with patently false friendliness. “I will take the contraband off your hands so you can return these men to your base camp.”

“Contraband?” Samples was now truly confused. No one had told him anything about any contraband. Jaramillo nudged him.

“Can I talk to you a minute, Sarge?” The worried look on Jaramillo’s face alarmed Samples. “On’t-day ive-gay im-hay anything.” It took Samples a moment to realize Jaramillo was speaking pig Latin, and another moment to translate it. He wobbled his head to straighten the jumble of thoughts this was bringing. Clearly Jaramillo was opposed to cooperating with the ARVNs, but Samples couldn’t imagine why. The captain, on the other hand, clearly wanted what was on that cart, and his desire appeared to exceed what Samples would expect for simply doing his duty.

“Hicks!” Samples called out. “Come here.” When the young man

arrived, Samples told him, "Guard the cart. I'll be right back." Then he turned to Captain Nguyen and faked a smile. "I've got to check with my lieutenant, sir. Be just a minute." Grabbing Jaramillo by the arm, he dragged him inside the APC, crowding in behind the men who were helping Jefferson. Quan and Albertson had removed the wounded man's uniform, and Allman was carefully peeling off the bandages.

"What the fuck's going on?" Samples demanded of Jaramillo in a harsh whisper.

"They didn't tell you?" Jaramillo asked with raised eyebrows.

"Tell me what?"

"We've got a ton of cash on the cart," Jaramillo confided in a very low voice. "We captured it from the NVA."

"A ton? What kind of cash?"

"Looks like a couple million, US dollars and South Vietnamese piasters."

"No shit? And the ARVNs know about it?"

"Afraid so." Jaramillo looked abashed. "They tried to take it a couple days ago. They killed Tony Mazzola, so we killed an ARVN sergeant and two of his men."

"You did what?" Samples was amazed. "Why didn't you just give them the money then?"

"It wasn't theirs. We were ordered to bring it back to Dau Tieng. And they shot first. I think the captain just wants it for himself."

Albertson looked directly at Samples and nodded. "That's the truth," he insisted. Quan also nodded emphatically.

Samples thought about it. He had not seen the greed on the faces of the other Vietnamese soldiers that was so evident on the captain's. And corruption among South Vietnamese officials was a poorly kept secret. He shook his head. "I've got to call the lieutenant. Albertson, hand me the mike."

As Albertson passed the microphone to Samples, Jaramillo gave the sergeant a warning look and then stared pointedly over his shoulder. Samples glanced back to see Captain Nguyen now standing on the ramp looking in,

his expression a mixture of curiosity and impatience. Samples scowled at him and held the mike up to his mouth while pushing the PTT button.

“Three-three Tango, this is Papa Sierra, over.”

A moment later Carr came back, the big radio on the wall of the track blaring. “This is Tango, go.”

“You need to come to my location ASAP, over.” Samples kept his voice calm but firm.

“Uh, can it wait? I’m kind of busy here, over.”

Samples could hear occasional gunfire, but it had mostly subsided. The rest of the platoon had probably reached the edge of the forest, and they were unlikely to bust jungle in pursuit.

“Negative,” Samples radioed. “We got us a situation here, over.”

“What kind of situation, over.”

“Not on the radio, over.”

There was a significant pause as Carr apparently digested that warning. Then the radio squawked again. “Be there in a few, out.”

Samples eyed Nguyen, whose eyes were squinting in barely concealed anger, his lips tightly together. Samples was developing a genuine dislike for the little rooster.

# EIGHTEEN

Sergeant Samples stepped out onto the ramp, using his considerable personal presence to force Nguyen to back up. The Vietnamese officer stumbled as he stepped off the ramp, recovering with as much dignity as possible while shooting a hateful glance at Samples. Nash saw this non-verbal interchange and smiled gleefully as he followed Samples outside. Hicks was standing by the cart, his M-16 at port arms as he faced the ARVN soldiers Nguyen had brought with him. Nash turned to survey the scene of the recent firefight, and saw individual soldiers, American and ARVN, wandering around collecting discarded NVA weapons and nudging bodies with their boots. Far to the northwest Nash could see the other two ARVN APCs and the three American APCs stopped at the edge of the forest, firing occasional shots but mostly just waiting. One of the American tracks swung around in place and began hurrying back toward Nash.

Realizing he still held two sniper rifles, Nash turned and went back inside the track and handed Trey's rifle to Albertson. "Make sure this goes with him," he told Harv. "How's he doing?"

"He's got a bad infection," Allman answered without looking up from his bandaging.

"We gave him some penicillin," Nash said, perhaps a little defensively.

"Probably kept it from being worse," Allman said. "I just gave him some more, and some morphine to kill the pain."

"Will he be all right?" Harv asked.

Allman shrugged. "He might have blood poisoning or something. I'm just a medic, not a doctor. We'll call for a dust off as soon as we get out of the Michelin into the clear."

Nash's mood darkened even more. The medic hadn't sounded hopeful.

Trey, who had been lying quietly with his eyes closed, slowly raised his head an inch and looked through bleary eyes at Nash. "Take care of my gear," he requested, his eyes drilling into Nash. Nash nodded in understanding. Then Trey's eyes closed and his head dropped, and moments later he was snoring.

Nash looked at Quan. "Quan, you stay in here with Trey, okay?" Quan nodded. "Harv, we better go outside and start unpacking the cart."

"Roger that," Harv answered, and both men ducked their heads as they went down the ramp and out into the speckled shade of the Michelin.

Samples and Nguyen stood staring at each other in an uneasy truce, while Hicks faced off against the other ARVNs. Nash stopped next to Samples and spoke in an easy conversational tone.

"All right if we go ahead and put our gear in the APC?" When Samples didn't give an immediate assent, and Nguyen looked alarmed, Nash added, "We'll leave the other stuff on the cart."

"Yeah, okay," Samples said, still watching Nguyen closely. "But just your personal gear."

Harv picked up his M-79 and Quan's two rifles and carried them inside the track. Nash propped his rifle against a tire and found his own backpack, and then Trey's. With the two packs slung over either shoulder, he passed Harv coming back out, lugged them up the ramp, and dropped them on the floor. As he came out he made room for Harv, who had the other three backpacks, and witnessed the arrival of Lieutenant Carr's APC. All that remained on the cart he had built was a bloody poncho liner and the two black backpacks they had liberated from the NVA.

When the other APC jerked to a halt, Lieutenant Carr jumped down and walked over to meet Samples. His RTO, Eberhart, climbed down but remained next to the track. Captain Nguyen started to go join Carr and Samples, but Nash stepped in front of him. "Excuse me, sir," he said respectfully, "but I think your RTO needs you." Nash had seen the radioman standing back by the captain's APC, and when Nguyen turned to look at him, Nash waved at the soldier. The man reflexively waved back, which, as Nash had hoped, Captain Nguyen took as a signal for himself. He looked over his shoulder at Samples and Carr, and then crossly strutted away to see what the radioman wanted.

Nash picked up his rifle and joined Hicks in guarding the cart with its two bags full of money. Harv, now carrying his M-79, came out of the track and wandered over to the cart as well. A few feet away Samples and Carr were conferring in hushed tones, the look on Carr's face changing from confusion to dismay to anger. Over at the ARVN APC, Nguyen was now furiously waving his arms and shouting at the cowering radioman, who had no idea what he had done wrong.

"Jaramillo!" Samples barked, jerking his head to indicate Nash should come over to where he and Carr were. Nash trotted over.

"Yes, sir?" he said, facing Carr.

"Those bags are full of cash?" Carr asked, leaning his head toward the cart.

"Yes, sir."

"What kind of cash?"

"Dollars and piasters, sir, in plastic-wrapped bundles."

"Real dollars, greenbacks, and not MPCs?"

"Yes, sir. Mostly hundreds."

"And you think it's two million?"

Nash shrugged. "Just a guess, sir. And for all I know, they might be counterfeit."

"How are the ARVNs involved?"

"Not sure, sir, but they found out about it a couple days ago. They tried to take it from us."

"When was this?"

Nash looked up at the tree tops as he replayed the last few days' events in his head. "Day before yesterday, I think."

"And they killed one of your spotters?" Carr's questions were taking an ugly turn.

"Yes, sir, without provocation. So we returned fire. There were three of them, a sergeant and two privates."

Carr's expression was now very dark. It didn't improve when Nguyen

strode up, his chest puffed out and his features in an irritated frown.

“Lieutenant!” he screeched without waiting for an introduction. “You must release the contraband immediately!”

Obviously struggling to remain calm, Carr told him, “I must contact my headquarters first.”

“There is no need! Those bags are the property of the Republic of Viet Nam, and I have been authorized to secure them.”

“Uh, authorized by whom?” Nash could tell that Carr was stalling.

“That is not your concern. I am your superior officer, and I am giving you an order.”

“You are not in my chain of command, Captain,” Carr replied, his eyes narrowing. “I will consult with my headquarters, and follow their instructions. You may wait here.” Carr spun on his heel and walked over to Eberhart.

Nash watched Nguyen and Samples glare at each other. Ominously, the other two ARVN APCs drove up and parked on either side of the captain’s, their guns currently aimed over the heads of the Americans. The remaining two American tracks were still a good ways away, by the edge of the plantation. Nash wondered if Nguyen had told his men about the money, and decided he had not. None of them were staring at the black bags, although many were watching the Americans with undisguised suspicion. And that made Nash suspect Nguyen had told them who had killed their fellow soldiers. The tension was almost palpable.

Lieutenant Carr passed the handset back to Eberhart and walked slowly back toward Nash and the others, his head bowed in thought. He came to a halt by Samples, looked appraisingly at Nash, and then faced Nguyen.

“Captain, this is a complex situation. I have been ordered to bring the, uh, ‘contraband’ and these men out to the main highway, and you and your men will come with us. We will all be met by some of your people, a couple MACV, and my superiors, where we will work all this out while we get a medevac in for our wounded soldiers, both yours and mine.”

Nash had only seen one ARVN with a bandage, but guessed there might be others inside the APCs. Regardless, the compromise and offer of medical assistance should help ratchet down the antagonism. Or so he thought.

“That will not be necessary,” Nguyen hissed through gritted teeth, his eyes flashing. “I will secure the contraband and turn it over to my superiors.” Not waiting for a reply, Nguyen turned and strode toward the cart, but his way was blocked by Harv Albertson. When Nguyen tried to move around the big soldier with his M-79, Harv side-stepped to stay in front of him. Nguyen puffed himself up and shouted, “Get out of my way!” Harv kept his expression blank and just shook his head slowly.

Nguyen shouted orders to his men in Vietnamese, and Nash saw them tense up and raise their weapons, just as the other two American APCs drove up and took positions around the ARVNs. The American soldiers had their guns at the ready, but the looks of confusion on their faces made it clear they did not understand what was going on. The South Vietnamese soldiers looked around, and realized they were outnumbered and outgunned. His face flushed with anger, Nguyen spun around and inhaled, apparently preparing to unleash a tirade against Lieutenant Carr, but then thought better of it.

Carr, remaining serene, said, “Would you and your men prefer to lead us out to the road, or would you prefer to follow us?”

Nguyen continued to glare at Carr as he considered the options. Finally he spat out, “We will be directly behind you. No funny business.”

“Fine,” Carr said in a conciliatory tone. “Hicks, would you and, uh. . .”

“Albertson,” Jaramillo said, helping Carr out.

“Yes, Albertson, please take those packs to my track and put them inside.”

When Albertson and Hicks each picked up a pack and slung it over their shoulders, Nguyen spoke again. “Two of my men will go with the bags, to ensure they are not tampered with.” His expression made it clear this was a demand, not a suggestion.

“Sure,” Carr acceded.

Nguyen gave orders in Vietnamese, and two of his soldiers trotted up and went with Hicks and Albertson over to the one-three track.

“Hicks,” Carr called, “why don’t you and Albertson ride with me. Looks like the one-one is going to be kind of crowded.”

“Sure thing, sir,” Hicks answered as he and Albertson shoved the black

packs through the personnel door at the rear. The Americans climbed up and found seats on the ammo boxes strapped to the top, ignoring the two ARVN soldiers. The ARVNs hesitated, then climbed up the rear and sat together on the open cargo hatch cover. They looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Anything else, Captain?” Carr asked Nguyen in a pleasant voice.

Nguyen just scowled and stomped away, motioning to his men to go to their APCs.

“Okay, men, mount up,” Carr shouted to the Americans. Then he turned to Samples and said in a low voice, “You’re tail-end Charlie. Keep an eye on those guys.” Then he turned to Nash and said, “You ride with Sergeant Samples.” Carr then grinned and said in a bad Cuban accent, “Lucy, you got some ‘splainin’ to do.”

Nash forced out a chuckle. The lieutenant was right. He would soon be facing an intensive interrogation about the events of the last few days. Although Trey had nominally been in charge of the mission, he was no longer in any condition to give a coherent account, and Nash realized that he himself had made most of the decisions, not Trey. He was slightly encouraged by Carr’s sympathetic attitude, and hoped Carr would back him up when he had to brief the senior officers who would inevitably determine his fate.

Carr walked away to his track, and Samples clapped Nash on the shoulder, saying, “Let’s go.” When they climbed up on top of the vehicle, Samples pointed to a vacant ammo crate on the right side of the open cargo hatch, behind a PFC holding an M-79. Quan came up through the hatch and took a seat behind Nash. Doc Allman climbed up and sat on the hatch cover, bracing his legs on the opposite side of the hatch, so he could look down and observe Trey’s condition as they moved. While they waited for the other three tracks to line up and move out, Nash looked down inside and mentally counted the sniper team’s backpacks. All five were present and accounted for.

When they emerged from the rubber plantation into the bright afternoon sunlight, things became chaotic. Helicopters circled overhead, and vehicles lined the road. Nash counted three Hueys overhead, one with South Vietnamese markings, and a Cobra gunship. In the middle of the dirt road sat

a Huey with a red cross on the nose, its blades spinning at idle, and an egg-shaped loach chopper, its blades stopped and drooping. Pulled to either side of the road were two deuce-and-a-half's, an MP armored car, a tall-roofed command armored personnel carrier, and five jeeps. At least fifty men milled around, some leaning against the vehicles, some standing together in small groups in the middle of the road, and some kneeling in the grass on either side providing security. Many of the men on the road, Nash noted with despair, had clean pressed uniforms that signaled they were officers.

"Fuck me," Nash muttered. Apparently Doc Allman heard him, and nodded in commiseration.

"What a cluster fuck!" Sergeant Samples said loudly enough for all the men on the track to hear. The line of APC's was edging down the road in stops and starts, urging the men in the road to move out of the way so they could all clear the plantation. Finally an MP stepped in front of the lead track and held up his hand like a traffic cop. The APCs following behind closed up until the four American tracks and the three ARVN tracks were parked nose to tail between the other vehicles that lined the road, just short of the dust-off chopper. One by one the tracks shut down their engines, and relative quiet settled over what looked like a traffic jam.

"Good thing the gooks don't have heavy artillery," Jamison commented. "One round would get us all."

Samples turned to face Nash and ordered, "Stay low." Nash nodded, understanding the sergeant's intent. This was going to be shit-show with all these officers, and the less involved Nash was, the better he would feel.

"Drop the ramp," Samples told the driver just before he jumped off the track, and Allman slid down off the hatch cover and disappeared inside. Up ahead Nash saw a guy in a jump suit and visored flight helmet running toward them carrying a stretcher. Nash signaled to the man, pointing down to indicate where the wounded man was. The man nodded and rushed around to the open back of the track. At the head of the line Lieutenant Carr had dismounted and was standing at attention while surrounded by four Americans and one South Vietnamese, all in the pressed uniforms and clean camouflaged helmets of senior officers. The body language spoke volumes. Carr was trying to respond to rapid-fire questions and demands, and struggling to maintain his composure. The officers were each trying to take

charge of the situation and overrule the others. Nash felt sorry for the lieutenant, but was glad he wasn't nearby. In fact, he thought, it might be better if he were out of sight. Below him Trey was carefully laid on the stretcher and then carried away to the medevac chopper.

Slowly, casually, trying not to draw attention to himself, Nash lowered himself to the interior of the track, tilting his head at Quan to indicate he should do the same. Nash sat on one of the benches and laid his rifle next to Trey's on top of the stacks of ammo cans that filled the front of the crew compartment. Apparently Trey wasn't allowed to bring his rifle on the medevac. Quan took a seat opposite. The rear ramp was open, and sometimes soldiers would walk by and glance in, but Nash and Quan ignored them. Just to be sure, however, they silently pulled the team's backpacks farther into the interior, away from the opening. Helicopters still circled overhead, their rotors and engines providing a constant background of noise.

"What happen now?" Quan asked.

"Nothing good," Nash said disconsolately. "The officers will argue, and we will probably get screwed."

Quan nodded wisely. That was how it was in any army.

Up above, Sergeant Jamison moved back and sat on a metal ammo case right beside the cargo hatch opening. Talking out of the side of his mouth, he gave them a play-by-play of what was happening outside. "They're really giving the Eltee hell. Sorry bastards. Well, shit. Now that little ARVN captain has come up, and he's really pissed, pointing at the one-three." The one-three, Nash knew, was the track with the bags of money in it. "Now one of the American colonels is getting all huffy, and another one is trying to intervene. Another chopper just landed. Looks like a general this time. It's going from bad to worse. Yep, it's a general. When he walked up, the others all came to attention. Eltee just signaled to Free. Now Free's coming this way. Not good."

A moment later Sergeant Samples came around the back of the track and stuck his head in. "They want to talk to you," he told Nash, shaking his head slowly.

"Should I bring my rifle?" Nash asked, reaching for it with one hand.

Samples paused to consider that, and Nash awaited his decision. It was

policy that a man never abandoned his weapon while out in the field, but carrying it to a meeting with senior officers might be considered a threat. Nash was also very conscious that he was wearing a dirty uniform and hadn't shaved in several days. "Better not," Samples finally decided, and stepped back to allow Nash to come out. Taking a deep breath, Nash followed Samples back to the growing crowd of officers at the front of the line.

As Nash and Samples approached the group, the general said something, and most of the other men backed away, walking over to the side of the road in small groups to leave just a select few around the general. Nash walked up and stood at attention next to Carr, the only one of the officers he felt at all comfortable with. When Samples walked away, Nash felt like he had been left all alone in the lion's den. He faced the general, whose name tape read Samuels. On either side of the general were two full colonels, named Aikens and Garfield, a lieutenant colonel named Carswell, and a South Vietnamese full colonel named, of course, Nguyen. Their facial expressions told Nash a lot. Nguyen was clearly angry, Carswell ambivalent, Aikens and Garfield pleased, and the general perturbed.

Nash understood why Nguyen was mad. He had undoubtedly been told a story by the ARVN captain that inflamed the inferiority complex the South Vietnamese military had regarding the Americans. The two beaming American colonels were going to take credit for the capture of the cash and the body count of NVA, as well as the confirmation of the rightness of their decision to send in a sniper team in the first place. Carswell, Nash could see from his shoulder patch, was MACV, an advisor to the South Vietnamese, and probably wasn't sure whose side he was on in this debate. And the general was stuck with resolving this relatively petty schoolyard dispute among allies, instead of prosecuting the war as he would prefer. Nash was pretty sure that he, as the lowest ranking person here, would end up taking all the blame.

"Okay, son," the general said to Nash in a surprisingly kindly tone, "tell me what happened out there. From the beginning."

Nash told the story, leaving out a couple minor points, but mostly complete and accurate. When he described the incident with the three ARVNs who tried to take the money, the South Vietnamese colonel interrupted and furiously decried Nash as a murderer until a stern look from the general caused him to seethe in silence. When Nash finished, the general

just looked at him and nodded.

“So how many NVA do you think you and your team killed?” the general finally asked.

Nash shrugged. “I never really counted,” he apologized.

“Well, think about it.”

Nash closed his eyes and tried to remember. Just thinking about all those deaths made him uncomfortable, and he hated the guilt he was already feeling, and which he was sure would grow as he had more time to internalize them. Then he thought of a way to come up with a number that wasn't so personal. He worked out how many rounds he had fired, how many magazines, and then deducted a few for the times he missed. Then he added a totally fabricated number for those killed by the other members of his team. “Maybe twenty-five,” he told the general. “Or thirty. I'd have to talk to the other guys to be sure.”

“Twenty-five or thirty,” the general mused. “I've had entire battalions in contact who couldn't get that kind of body count. Outstanding, Specialist Jaramillo.” Nash was amazed that the general had pronounced his name correctly. The general turned to Colonel Garfield and said, “Jim, maybe you ought to make him a sergeant.”

“Yes, sir,” Garfield replied. “I believe you're right.” Nash thought Garfield was being a brown-nose, but in this case he didn't mind.

“Now let's see the money,” the general announced.

Lieutenant Carr spun around and signaled to a sergeant named Montoya who had been guarding the personnel door of the one-three track. Montoya unlatched the door, swung it around until it locked open, and reached inside. Samples rushed over to help Montoya bring the packs over and drop them in front of the general. Nash stepped back to give them room. Carr knelt down and undid the straps, spreading the tops open to reveal the plastic wrapped bundles of cash.

“Holy shit,” the general breathed. “Do you think it's real?” He looked up at Nash for an answer.

“It could be counterfeit,” Nash offered, “but if it is, it's really good counterfeit.”

“We’ll have to have our experts take a look.”

“That is the property of the Republic of South Viet Nam,” Colonel Nguyen asserted, apparently not surprised at the size of the hoard.

“How do you figure?” the general asked mildly.

“It was captured from the communist insurgents, and it happened in our country.”

“Yes, but it was captured by Americans,” the general pointed out.

“Who are here at our invitation,” Colonel Nguyen insisted. “This is our war, so this is our money.”

The general looked doubtful, but didn’t deny the man’s logic. “Well, let’s have our experts check it out, and then let Saigon figure out what to do with it. You can have one of your men accompany the packs, to ensure it all gets where it needs to be.” The general looked over at Nash again, raising one eyebrow.

“All the money’s in those bags, isn’t it?” he asked. “You didn’t keep any for yourself, did you?”

“Sir?” Nash responded anxiously, knowing he must look frightened.

The general laughed. “I’m just joking, son. I trust you.”

Nash sighed with relief. But then the Vietnamese colonel spoke.

“Maybe he should be searched.” He was serious, staring at Nash with undisguised suspicion.

“Go ahead,” Nash replied defiantly, spreading his arms.

“That won’t be necessary,” the general said, shooting a glare at Nguyen. “Where are the MPs?” Nash felt a thrill of panic at that question, fearing he was about to be arrested and searched, but the general was motioning for a couple MPs to come pick up the money bags and carry them to their armored car. Nguyen quickly shouted orders in Vietnamese to the little captain from the firefight, who ran over and officiously escorted the bags to the MP vehicle.

The general watched them load the bags and climb in, slamming the doors shut behind them. “All right,” he commanded everyone within earshot, “show’s over, let’s get back to work.”



# NINETEEN

Nash huddled under the overhang and pulled off his dripping poncho while he tried to scrape as much of the mud off his boots as he could. Draping the poncho over his forearm, he then pushed in through the screen door and stopped at the desk that served as a nurse's station in this ward of the Cu Chi hospital. The medic who sat behind the desk with his feet propped on an open drawer looked up from his copy of The Stars and Stripes newspaper and raised his eyebrow.

"Trey Jefferson?" Nash asked, looking down the rows of beds on either side of the long room. He had to speak up to be heard over the drum of rain on the corrugated tin roof.

The medic glanced down at a clipboard on the desk, and then said, "Fourth bed on the left." Nash nodded as the medic went back to reading his paper.

Trey was lying on his left side reading a paperback book and didn't see Nash until he came around the foot of the bed and sat on the wooden chair next to the bed, picking up some opened letters that lay there and tossing them onto the sheets.

How you feeling, Trey?" he asked.

Trey looked up and smiled. "Nash, how the hell are you? Whoa! They made you a sergeant?" He pointed at the new sergeant pins on Nash's collar. "What's the world coming to?"

"Yeah, got those yesterday. No big deal. You look a lot better than you did last time I saw you."

Trey nodded. "Feel better, too. Man, I was really whacked out there. I am really grateful for what you guys did for me. How're Harv and Quan?"

"They're fine. Back at the barracks, sleeping and eating."

"So what happened back at the road, with all the officers?"

"A cluster-fuck. What'd you expect?" Nash chuckled. "The general really told off that ARVN colonel. Some MPs took the money somewhere to

be checked and counted. God knows what will happen with it.”

Trey frowned. “They’ll give it to South Vietnamese, I’ll bet.”

“Yeah, the piasters for sure. I don’t know about the dollars. I can’t see them giving those greenbacks to them. Maybe convert it to piasters first, though.”

“And who gets the dollars?”

Nash looked up at the beams that held up the corrugated roof. “Ah, you know how that goes. Probably send them back to the States, turn them in to the treasury.”

“Unless they’re counterfeit,” Trey suggested, raising his eyebrows. “But how would we know?”

“Well,” Nash said, looking directly at Trey, “if I had some of those bills, hypothetically speaking, I’d take one down to the bank, tell them I’d found it on the street or something, and ask them to check and see if it’s real or not.” He lifted one shoulder for a second. “If not, then no harm, no foul.”

“Yeah,” Trey agreed, “I can see that.”

“Which reminds me,” Nash said, “I need your mom’s address.”

“Why?”

“Well, tomorrow’s Tuesday, when the PX gets in a new shipment. I’m thinking about buying her something and sending it to her. You know, something nice like a coffee percolator or a vase.” He looked into Trey’s eyes, trying to send a mental message, until Trey finally took a deep breath and nodded knowingly.

“I see,” Trey said. He reached for the letters Nash had laid on the bed, and pulled an empty envelope from the stack. “Here, take this, it’s got her address on it.”

Nash took the envelope, made sure he could read the neatly printed return address, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. “Better write her and let her know it’s coming,” Nash advised. “Maybe tell her not to open it until you get home, so you can see her reaction.”

“Good idea,” Trey said. They exchanged more conspiratorial looks and grinned. Nash was already feeling guilty, but he kept pushing the feeling deep inside, dismissing it as a useless remnant of his Catholic heritage. So he

decided to change the subject.

“So what’s the prognosis?” Nash asked.

“They think I might have gotten septicemia or some such shit. They’re sending me back to the World. The doc thinks I’ll probably have a permanent limp and get a medical discharge.”

“A million-dollar wound,” Nash suggested. That was what GI’s called any wound that sent you back to the States but didn’t permanently disfigure you.

“Looks like it,” Trey agreed. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re still being debriefed about the Michelin. They got a lot of questions, about tactics and stuff, and about what the NVA are doing in there. After a while, they’re probably going to send us back in there.”

“Just you and Harv and Quan?”

“I guess. They might give us another sniper and spotter, I don’t know. But they wouldn’t be as good as you and Tony. I think I’d rather just go out with Harv and Quan, keep it simple.”

“I know what you mean,” Trey said with a sly grin. “I wasn’t too happy when they made me take you out.”

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” Nash countered with a laugh. Then he became totally distracted when an American nurse walked up pushing a wheelchair. Even though she wore jungle fatigues, and was kind of plain-looking, she was the first round-eye woman Nash had seen in months, and he jumped to his feet to greet her.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said eagerly. “What can I do for you?”

She sighed, apparently tired of such reactions, and told him, “You’ll have to leave now. Sergeant Jefferson has to go for X-rays.”

“Again?” Trey complained.

“Again,” the nurse told him like he was a spoiled child.

“Okay,” Nash said to Trey, “I’ll see you later. Take it easy, man.”

“You, too.” Trey gave him a half-assed salute, and then began squirming around on the bed to line up with the wheelchair.

Nash walked to the entrance, put on his poncho again, and dove out into

the rain.

While the rain beat down on the roof of the barracks and poured off the eaves, Nash sat on his bunk and meticulously cleaned his rifle, for the third time since they had returned from the Michelin. It wasn't really dirty, but he was nervous and needed something to occupy his hands. The parts were neatly laid out on the dark green wool blanket that covered his cot, and he used a toothbrush and cotton swabs to get every last speck of carbon out of the corners and ridges of the finely machined metal pieces. Harv lay on his back in the next bunk, holding a paperback novel over his head to read it, but Nash noticed that he hadn't turned a page in at least five minutes. Quan was standing up in the middle of the room playing with some complicated wooden puzzle. Other soldiers were coming in and out, napping on their bunks, or playing cards. It was lunch time, and everyone was taking advantage of the break from their regular duties.

Between Nash and Harv was the stack of colorfully printed cardboard boxes containing the items they had purchased this morning at the PX. There was an aluminum pressure cooker, two electric rice cookers, a twelve-cup coffee percolator, and a Zenith Transoceanic radio the size of a briefcase. Nash kept a watchful eye on them as he worked on his rifle, and mostly ignored questions from the other soldiers about the hoard. When pressed, he said they were all gifts for the folks back home, and they had gotten lucky at the PX, which usually sold out of everything good within an hour of opening. It was widely believed that most of the PX merchandise that arrived from the States or Japan was siphoned off to the black market before it ever made it to the shelves.

One of the more obnoxious guys who lived in the barracks, a short guy from New York with frizzy hair, had stopped to look at the stack of goods, and then commented loudly, "What's with the rice cookers? You guys ain't slopeheads."

Nash looked at him with disgust. "You've never heard of Spanish rice?" he asked.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Forgot about that." Slightly abashed, the guy wandered away. In the next bunk Harv snorted as he stifled a laugh.

Nash checked his watch, and then began reassembling his rifle. As he

had hoped, the other soldiers began filtering away, putting on their ponchos and diving out into the downpour to return to work. By the time his rifle was back in one piece, the action checked, and it was returned to the carrying case, only Nash, Harv, and Quan were left. Harv put down the book and sat up, throwing his legs over the side of the cot and resting his elbows on his knees. Quan put the puzzle down on his bunk and looked questioningly at Nash.

“Let’s get it done,” Nash said, “while we’ve got the chance. Quan, guard the door.”

Quan nodded and went to stand by the screen door at the end of the low barracks building. Nash pulled the radio off the stack and set it on the bunk while he examined the box carefully. Harv picked up the box with the pressure cooker.

“Try to open it so it doesn’t look like it was opened,” Nash cautioned him.

“I know,” Harv replied, nodding jerkily. He tentatively touched the tape securing the box top, and then pulled out a pocket knife and slowly sliced the tape along the edges of the box. Nash’s box wasn’t taped, but it had tabs inserted into slots that had to be carefully withdrawn in such a way that they wouldn’t be ripped or bent.

When the lid was free, Nash pulled out the packing material, neatly setting it aside so he would know how it went back in, and pulled the radio out. It was a huge portable radio, with a big folding handle across the top, and a front panel that dropped down to reveal the controls and dials. It received twelve bands, according to the printing on the box, including AM, FM, and shortwave. It was a cool radio, Nash acknowledged, but that wasn’t why he had bought it. He laid it down on its face and found the catches for the battery compartment. Popping the cover off, he saw the semi-tubular channels for the batteries; it required eight D-cell batteries in three rows. He hoped the compartment would be roomy enough.

He had left the rifle bag on the bunk intentionally, and he now unzipped it and dug way down inside, past the rifle, to a hidden compartment that was closed with a snap. Unsnapping it, he pulled out five stacks of one hundred dollar bills, still wrapped in clear plastic. Jerking his head around, he made sure no one was looking in the windows, and Quan was still by the door, and

then slid four of the stacks under his pillow. The fifth stack he quickly sliced open with his bayonet and fanned the bills. He was too frightened to take the time to count them, but he estimated there were at least a hundred. He tried rolling the stack long ways, but the stack was too thick, so he divided it into two piles and tried again. They wouldn't easily roll that way, so he turned the stack and rolled it up from one end, like he had seen done in some crime movie. That worked better. He didn't have any rubber bands, since they rotted quickly in this environment, but he had thought ahead and purchased a writing tablet and some packing tape while they were at the PX. He put the roll between his legs to hold it and folded a sheet of writing paper into a three-inch-wide strap. Retrieving the roll, he squeezed it as tightly as he could and wrapped it with the paper. He picked up the roll of packing tape, and realized he needed a third hand.

Harv was stuffing stacks of bills into the pressure cooker. "Can you give me a hand?" Nash asked.

Harv stuffed the last stack of bills into the pot and placed the lid back on it. "Sure. So that's how you're going to do it?" He took the tape from Nash and pulled off a short length, cutting it with his pocket knife.

"The radio may not have been such a good idea," Nash admitted, taking the tape and using it to secure the roll of money. "Too much trouble." He tested the fit of the roll in the battery compartment; it was almost too large, but if he pushed it down, it looked like the compartment cover would latch.

"Are you sure about this?" Harv asked as he put the pressure cooker back in the box.

"What do you mean?"

"Taking this money. We're kind of stealing, aren't we?"

Nash sighed. He was already feeling guilty, and having Harv question their actions didn't help.

"We talked about this back in the rubber," Nash reminded him. "It's not really stealing. We are taking home souvenirs, which is allowed. It's not like we're sending home guns or ammo or something." Nash made another roll of bills, and Harv cut him another piece of tape.

"Yeah, but. . ." Harv shook his head slowly as he used the packing tape to reseal the pressure cooker box.

“And look, where would this money go if we had turned it in? They’ll give it to the South Vietnamese, and *they’ll* give it to the VC. So in a way, we’re helping the war effort.”

“I guess,” Harv admitted reluctantly. “But even having real dollars here is against regs, much less sending them home in the mail.”

“Regs are meant to be broken,” Nash assured him. He was also trying to convince himself. “And don’t we deserve something for what we did, other than a little bit of combat pay and a shiny medal?”

“You got a promotion,” Harv pointed out with a touch of jealousy.

“BFD,” Nash replied, using the Army abbreviation for ‘big fucking deal.’ “You’ll get one, too, I’ll bet. And does an extra twenty or thirty dollars a month really compensate us for risking our lives like that?” Nash was using all his powers of persuasion on Harv, and didn’t really believe any of what he was saying. Yes, he had been drafted, but he was serving his country, and shouldn’t demand that he be paid more than any other soldier. But out in the Michelin Trey and Nash and Harv and Quan had all agreed that Tony’s family should be compensated, and Trey deserved something for being wounded, so therefore they might as well all get something.

“No one’s going to miss the money,” Nash noted. “So nobody’s going to come looking for it.” He was still trying to convince himself as much as Harv. He finished up another money roll, the last one that would fit, and placed it in the radio, carefully latching the cover shut. He still had two packets of cash under the pillow. Sliding the radio into the box, he replaced the packing material and closed the lid. Once the tabs were reinserted, he lifted the box and examined it, shaking it slightly. It felt and looked like new.

Harv had picked up one of the boxes with a rice cooker and was slicing through the tape that sealed it. Nash put down the radio box and reached under his bunk to pull out Trey’s backpack, which he had kept down there next to his own. When he had the rice cooker box open and the packing removed, Harv bent over and pulled Tony’s backpack out from under his bunk and began unstrapping the top. Nash picked up the percolator and opened the box. After removing the cardboard packing, he pulled at the knob on top of the device. When he had the lid off, he removed the basket and percolating tube and set them aside. He reached into Trey’s backpack and

began pulling out stacks of money, stuffing them into the percolator. He had to try a couple different arrangements before he could get all five stacks to fit, and there was no room left for the basket and tube. He shrugged. If someone ever looked inside, the missing basket would be the least of his problems. He snapped the lid back on.

Across from him Harv had easily gotten Tony's share into the rice cooker and was resealing the box. Nash got the other rice cooker and opened it. As he had feared, the radio hadn't held all five of his stacks, so he put the remaining two into the cooker. He told himself this was better anyway, since if one package didn't get through, the other would. He was just resealing the box when Quan called out a warning. Hurriedly Nash and Harv restacked the boxes and hid the packing tape. Two soldiers came in through the door, laughing and shaking off the rainwater. Nash sat back and tried to look innocent and relaxed.

The rain let up later that afternoon, and Harv, Quan, and Nash carried the five boxes to the APO, the post office where they could mail them back home. There was a line of guys at the window, which Nash actually felt was a good thing. If the post office was busy, they might not pay much attention to what was being mailed. Inside, along two of the walls of the waiting area, were wide wooden shelves containing wrapping paper, string, tape, and mailing labels. Harv and Nash staked out a section of the shelf while Quan set his package down and left. Harv and Nash put one of each of their packages under the shelf next to the one Quan had brought, and set the other on top so they could start wrapping. One of the mail clerks was patrolling the area, and came over to inspect the packages. The inspection was cursory.

"Not sending home any weapons or ammo, are you?" the guy asked in a bored tone. He ran his hands over the sealed tops of the boxes, and lifted a couple experimentally, apparently judging the weight.

"Nope," Nash assured him. "Just presents for the folks back home. And a radio for me."

The clerk tapped the radio box with one finger. "Yep, them are pretty good radios, I hear. Can get any signal there is, from all around the world."

"Yeah," Nash agreed heartily. "I can't wait to get home and listen to it. Didn't want to use it here, though. Might get stolen."

“I know what you mean,” the clerk said. “Wrap these things up good, you hear? Use plenty of brown paper and string. It’s a long way back to the States, you don’t want ‘em to get damaged.”

“Roger that,” Harv piped up with a nervous smile.

The clerk wandered away to check on some other soldiers wrapping packages. Nash heaved a sigh of relief, then pulled a long piece of brown paper off the roll and cut it with the scissors lying on the shelf. While Nash figured out how to neatly cover the radio box with the paper, Harv began wrapping the rice cooker with his money inside. He had slightly dented one corner of the box so he could be sure it was his and not Nash’s.

“Think they’ll X-ray them,” Harv asked very quietly, apparently hoping the hubbub of the busy post office would cover his question.

Nash shrugged. “Probably. But all they’ll see is the metal parts.”

“I hope you’re right.” Nothing further was said as they got the packages ready for mailing. Nash pulled out the envelope Trey had given him to create a mailing label for the percolator.

At the window, Nash told the clerk the percolator was going to his aunt in St. Louis, to explain why it was being mailed to a Thelma Jefferson. He had addressed the rice cooker with Tony’s money to his own home, intending to deliver it himself after he was back in the world. He would still need to come up with a good story for Tony’s family to explain where the money had come from, but he had plenty of time to work on that. He sure hoped Trey had sent the letter to his mother about not opening the percolator package until Trey was there with her. Which reminded him, he needed to send a letter to his folks in Espanola asking them not to open the three packages they would be receiving.

As Harv and Nash walked back to the barracks, Nash felt a combination of relief and new anxiety. The packages were now on their way, so the money was out of their hands. It could no longer be discovered by a random barracks inspection, so Harv and Nash were safe, or as safe as any combat soldier could be in Viet Nam. Nash didn’t know what Quan had done with his piasters, and didn’t ask. He figured the less he knew about that, the better. He had noticed, however, that Quan had been looking at a Vietnamese sales brochure for Honda 50 motorcycles. The worry now, at least for Nash, was that the money would somehow be discovered in transit,

and the mailing labels would lead right back to him and Harv. He was sure he would be on pins and needles for the next couple weeks. He almost hoped that they would be given a new mission and sent back out into the boonies, just so he would have something to distract him.

“Okay,” Harv moped, “I guess we are now officially criminals.”

Nash felt a new pang of guilt, but tried to suppress it. “Don’t look at it that way, Harv. We are soldiers who have followed the time-honored Army way of requisitioning supplies. We have liberated something that only the enemy knew about and wanted, so we are depriving them of resources. We are actually doing our duty. That’s how you have to look at it.”

“Sure,” Harv grunted. He didn’t sound convinced. Nash felt the same way. But he also felt like he would have a head start on life when he got home. And he felt the Army owed him something.

“Do you think I can go to America some day?” Quan asked out of the blue. Nash looked up from the letter he was writing and stared at the Vietnamese, who was looking through an old copy of LIFE magazine with a cover photo of war protestors. Harv was racked out on his bunk, gently snoring. Otherwise the barracks was empty. That morning they had all gone to the range; Nash had re-zeroed his XM-21, and Quan and Harv had zeroed Tony’s old M-16. It had taken a lot of hassle, but Nash had managed to convince the powers that be that Quan should be issued a weapon, and since Tony’s M-16 was already available, it was better than one of the ARVN M-2 carbines. The firing range couldn’t accommodate Harv’s M-79, so mostly he helped Quan and Nash with spotting, and fired the M-16 just for fun.

After lunch at the mess hall, the three men had gone back to the barracks to wait for orders. Captain Banning had said a new mission for them was being worked on, and that they should hang loose and be ready. At Nash’s insistence, Harv, Nash, and Quan were now officially a sniper team unit, ready and willing to operate on their own. He had also put in a strong request for Harv to be promoted to Spec Four. He had dismissed the idea of adding more men to the team, telling Banning that their experience in the Michelin had proved to Nash that a three-man team was the ideal set-up. While that was mostly true, the real reason was that the three of them had formed a tight bond, both by their actions in combat, and by their secret conspiracy about

the money. Nash didn't want some FNGs joining the team and disturbing the team dynamic. Or possibly figuring out about the money.

"I guess so," Nash told Quan. "To, like, visit, or to move there?"

Quan shrugged. "Maybe visit. If I like, maybe stay. Is possible?"

"Sure, you can emigrate. People immigrate to the US all the time. What, you don't like Viet Nam, living in a war zone all the time?"

Quan gave him a disgusted look. "It is not funny," he grumbled. Then he sighed. "Communists win one day."

"What?" Nash gasped. "How can you say that?"

"They not win on battlefield," Quan predicted. "They win with politics. America not stay here forever, and Saigon government bad. I no want to be here then."

"General Westmoreland says we're winning," Nash pointed out, for the sake of argument.

"And generals never lie," Quan replied sarcastically.

The screen door of the barracks flew open and slammed into the wall with a bang. Nash looked over to see Trey in a wheelchair, pushed by some medic or orderly, bump over the door sill and roll into the room. In his lap Trey had a half-empty duffle bag.

"As you were, men," Trey boomed officiously, a wide grin splitting his face. The man behind the wheelchair, a skinny white guy with glasses, had an annoyed expression as he pushed Trey over to the bunk when Nash stood up to greet the newcomer. Harv woke up with a jerk and jumped up to join Quan as they patted Trey's shoulders and shook his hand.

"Hey, good to see you up and about," Nash told Trey, smiling warmly.

"So they finally let you out," Harv said. "Whose butt did you have to kiss?"

"Nobody's, Harv," Trey responded patiently. "They just saw the error of their ways."

"He's not supposed to be here," the orderly interrupted.

"Yeah," Trey said. "My man here took a detour for me. I'm supposed to be going to the air strip."

“The air strip?” Nash said with surprise. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the World, man. They’re sending me to Walter Reed, and then kicking my black ass out of the Army.”

“No shit? Is that a good thing?” Nash wasn’t sure how Trey would feel about that, since he had seemed pretty gung ho before, and was the only one of them who had joined the Army voluntarily.

“Nothing better,” Trey beamed. “Gonna go home, see my mom, and have some of that good coffee.” He grinned slyly up at Nash.

Nash laughed out loud, with Quan and Harv joining him. The orderly just looked confused, not understanding what the joke was.

“Maybe I come see you,” Quan said as the laughter subsided. Trey furrowed his brow.

“Quan’s thinking about immigrating to the States,” Nash explained.

“Okay,” Trey said, absorbing this information. “Maybe open a restaurant or something. I can see that.”

Quan smiled broadly, glad that his idea was being accepted.

“We gotta get to the air strip,” the orderly grumbled. “Come on, man.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Trey complained, “hurry up and wait. The plane doesn’t leave for two hours. And it’s just taking me to Tan Son Nhut, where I’ll have to wait for another plane.”

“But that one’s the big silver bird,” Nash pointed out. “The freedom bird. With round-eye stewardesses, I hear.”

“Yeah,” Trey enthused with an affected urban accent, “and they be just dying for my big black dick.”

Nash and Harv laughed, and Nash told him, “I doubt that. But good luck, anyway.”

“We have to go,” the orderly insisted, and began turning the wheelchair around. The screen door slammed open again and the company clerk stuck his head in.

“Jaramillo! Captain Banning wants to see you. You’re going out again.” Then the clerk strode off back to the orderly room.

“Oh, damn,” Nash said.

“BOHICA,” Trey jibed as the orderly pushed him toward the door.

Indeed, Nash thought to himself as he reached for his hat. Bend over, here it comes again.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

The rubber trees in the Michelin plantation were not actually aligned with the points of the compass. The grid was in fact tilted toward the north-northeast. To make it easier for the reader (and the author) to keep the directions straight, I chose to pretend that the rows ran north-south and east-west, thus following the Army dictum of KISS—keep it simple, stupid. The descriptions of the plantation itself are based on the author's personal experience.

Training, equipment, and tactics of Army snipers in this era were outlined in detail by a contemporary analysis of sniper operations prepared for the United States Army, Republic of Vietnam. This document was invaluable in writing this book. For a broader understanding of all military activities in this area at this time, I depended on a 60-page debriefing report by the 25<sup>th</sup> Division commanding general, Major General Hollis, dated 20 May 1970.

Several money caches were discovered during the war, although none were as big as the one described in this book. The 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne found \$150,000 in \$50 bills, and another cache was found near Bien Hoa that contained \$5000 in one hundred and five hundred dollar bills.