



CHAPTER 2

Dark memories - Bangkok, Thailand – June 1, 1983 – 2345 Local
Time

UPON TURNING EIGHTEEN IN November of 1970, the Army came calling. Unlike most young men forced to serve when their number popped up, I was thrilled. Being in the service was the only place Samuel couldn't reach me anymore. Vietnam was over eight-thousand miles away from the cruel man who made me call him father, which I did to his face. Inside my head, I stopped referring to him by a title

he did not deserve. Years of being on the receiving end of his beefy fists and degrading punishment schemes left me eager to release deep-seated anger onto the enemy.

My deployment overseas worked for a while. After basic training, I landed in Saigon as part of the 1st Infantry Division—The Big Red One—and headed to War Zone D in the Iron Triangle. In late February of 1971, less than three months into my tour of duty in the jungle, shit got real. While assisting the South Vietnamese in Lam Son 719, dubbed Dewey Canyon II, to clear the way for ARVN to move to the Laotian border, we advanced westward on Highway 9, and our platoon was ambushed in the dead of night. Charlie preferred to fight under the cover of darkness. Thirty-four good men died, and the remaining six of us were captured by the Viet Cong.

Escaping the brutal hands of my father had worked, but the price I paid for freedom was spending twenty-four grueling months as a POW.

When the rest of American troops pulled out in early 1973, it was another two months before my rescue, and by then, I was a shell of my former self, and the sole surviving prisoner from my unit.

A wide range of emotions overwhelmed me on the bumpy helicopter flight to Saigon, leaving permanent scars embedded inside my brain, alongside the physical ones on my body inflicted by the enemy. Survivor's guilt consumed me, pushing me to the precipice of insanity many times. Before returning home, it took weeks of physical therapy at the hospital on Clark Air Base in the Philippines to address a myriad of health issues, including malnutrition, lice infestation, intestinal parasites, muscle atrophy, gum disease and skin lesions.

Considering the pathetic conditions of the hospital, it's a miracle I pulled through. Government healthcare had been

horrendous back then, but with the formation of national non-profit organizations such as Vietnam Veterans of America, the treatment of returning heroes changed for the better.

That wasn't the case for me, though.

Some pasty-faced head shrink tried to get me to talk about my experiences a few times, but I refused to speak during each session. How could I explain the brutality of my captors and the horrendous torture they inflicted on us to someone who had never set foot in the jungles of Vietnam? Besides, the mental games played by the VC during my imprisonment were enough, and I vowed to let no one worm their way inside my head again. And I've kept that promise. Battling the horrific nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, growing distrust of people, and teetering on the edge of being a lone wolf were my crosses to bear and overcome.

I found out later my freedom came from secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese by the U.S. government, known as *Operation Homecoming*. Hundreds of men returned home, including me, but many soldiers were not so fortunate. According to information provided during my briefing on *Operation DFC* last week, it is possible over 1,000 men, or their remains, are still behind enemy lines, which is why I'm in Thailand. I hope their extradition will help ease the guilt of living still gnawing inside my gut.

For too many years, the existence of POWs was a taboo subject—pushed under the rug as though nothing more than leftover debris from a controversial war, but things changed as the families of those missing began speaking out. Groups like the National League of POW/MIA Families and the National Alliance of Families for the Return of America's Missing Servicemen formed and put pressure on both governments to not only bring the men home but also obtain a comprehensive listing of every service member missing in

action. They made some progress during the war, but when it ended, so did the interest of most war-weary citizens and the government.

Perceptions changed when wounded veteran, Jan Scruggs, founded the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in 1979. Other veterans joined and helped raise enough funds to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D.C. I almost attended the dedication ceremony in November of last year but realized I was not ready to see the names of my fallen brothers from my platoon engraved in stone.

When former POW at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, John McCain, won the election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1982, average Americans heard about his horrific five-and-a-half-year imprisonment and were appalled.

The real game-changers were the successful movies *The Deer Hunter* in 1978 and *First Blood* that came out last year. Though both films were nothing alike, they were starting points people used to broach painful truths about the horrors of war.

It took a decade to flip over the rug and acknowledge the dirty truth, all because of Hollywood films.

Ridiculous.

Once free, I was mentally and physically broken upon returning to Arkansas. The amount of hatred directed toward soldiers coming back from overseas hindered my healing process. The disrespect astounded me then and still astounds me years later. I am no fool; I heard about some soldiers committing despicable acts on innocent civilians, but I saw nothing like that because the men in my unit, and our superiors, were upstanding people.

Instead of a hero's welcome, returning war-weary soldiers were treated like enemy combatants. The anti-war machine spewed out foul and disturbing rhetoric, tainting the minds of

those who had never spent one minute in combat. Invading countries and killing the enemy is never a clean, cut-and-dry deployment. It's dark, ugly, dangerous, brutal, and ungodly.

Thankfully, most of the bullshit pushed by liberals was only on television, movies, or newsprint, all three of which I steered clear of once back in the U.S.

I refused to return to my hometown of Perla because I was not a scared, naïve boy any longer, and if Samuel dared to lay one hand on me or toss out a foul look or word, I'd kill him.

No doubts at all.

The Army taught me several ways to dispatch an enemy, and Samuel Witherspoon was my enemy.

Instead of returning to yet another prison, I rode the bus farther, stopping finally in Monticello—a place where I did not know a soul, nor did a single resident know me. Most of the people I met while there were kind, loyal, and supportive, including the owner of the boarding house I stayed at while in college.

Score one for southern hospitality and Ms. Emma June Larson's mouth-watering, soul-stirring apple pies and willingness to help me study for my GED.

I spent the next four years at the University of Arkansas at Monticello, courtesy of the G.I. Bill, studying crop and land management with the dream of getting a G.I. Loan to buy a farm that would put the one my father had owned to shame. Living on campus was not an option for me because crowds set my nerves on edge. It took several meetings in the dean's office to get approval for me to live off-campus.

Lucky me, because Emma June's place was quiet, calming, and a short walk to classes.

During my college days, I came to terms with the fact I wanted to hurt the man whose last name I carried as he had hurt me for so many years but in a way that wouldn't land me

behind bars. Creative justice and revenge are parts of human nature, and I am very human.

When a small boy, I detested grubbing in the dirt and shoveling manure, but I realized later while wallowing in mud and filth in 'Nam that it was only Samuel I hated, not the land, so farming didn't seem so bad.

Peaceful.

Natural.

Normal.

The way God intended man to live. Farming was a perfect way to reconstruct the broken pieces of my soul by sustaining myself from the bounty of the ground. It's what I knew, and despite my horrific upbringing, I am good at my craft.

During my last month in college, two men from the CIA came sniffing around. By that point in my life, I had major trust issues, especially with strangers or people posing as government agents, and boy, did I put them through the wringer to prove they were the real deal.

To my surprise, they were legit.

The CIA wanted to recruit me, insisting my time as a POW, coupled with stellar skills provided in the military and chosen college major, made me the perfect combination for a spy, and my country needed men like me badly. I balked at first, but when they informed me one of my potential assignments, if I passed a series of arduous tests, would be the chance to help rescue other men still trapped behind enemy lines. That's all the convincing I needed.

If I accepted the offer, they told me that after graduation, my entire history would be destroyed, and Rafe Witherspoon would cease to exist. I had to agree to cut ties with everything and everyone in my past, and I followed the edict almost to the letter.

Almost.

I refused to give up the relationship with Cathy, the only woman I've ever loved, and my friendship—no, the bond—with Brad James. From day one of my college experience, he'd been in almost every class with me. Brad grew up on a farm in Louisiana and had served in the 1st Marine Division of the United States Marine Corps. He endured three tours of duty in 'Nam before succumbing to a nasty, life-altering experience after falling into a pit full of sharpened bamboo spikes covered in human waste, better known as punji sticks. Recovering from the injuries of the fall paled compared to the horrendous infection pumping through his bloodstream, which took months to heal.

Even though Brad's a few years older than me, and certainly rougher around the edges, wearing his anger like a leather accessory, almost daring someone to say a cross word (which they never did—Brad is a total badass), we hit it off immediately. We were just two southern farm boys trying to make their way in a world that hated us for risking our lives to assist the people of South Vietnam in obtaining freedom. Both of us suffered from horrific cases of war neurosis.

We only spoke one time about our individual overseas tours in our respective branches of the military. It happened during spring break our freshman year while camping in the Ouachita Mountains. We were shit-faced drunk, and while three-sheets to the wind, I almost caved and told him about my imprisonment by the brutal Viet Cong but could not bring myself to relive the humiliation and fear. When I abruptly paused, he instinctively knew—the pain I hid from others was recognizable to another who'd been through some major trauma. At that point in my life, I was still thin and had yet to recover completely, and Brad easily put the pieces together.

Instead of pressing me for information, he simply smiled and replied in his heavy twang, "They may have caught you

for a while, but they didn't break you. You're still here, which means you beat them. Rafe Witherspoon—one. Commie gooks—zero.”

From that moment, Brad zoomed past friendship status and straight into brotherhood. He isn't a typical jarhead. He is highly intelligent and can look past surface-level crap and see into the heart and soul of others.

After my visit from the men in black, he sensed I was struggling with something, so he invited me to join him over the Memorial Day weekend to spend time with his family in Louisiana before graduation.

I almost declined as I grappled with a major life choice but, in the end, decided it would give my brain a temporary reprieve from overthinking things.

Best. Decision. Ever.

As Brad drove toward bayou country, I downed several cold beers and a few shots of Old Grand-Dad and ended up telling him I was considering an offer for a job traveling to several countries overseas, and that if I accepted it, we could no longer communicate.

For several miles, he remained quiet before asking, “So, if we run into each other in the future, I should act as though I don't recognize you?”

“That would be best, I believe.”

“Rafe, I hope whatever job you'll be doing is worth the price of giving up your identity.”

“Yeah, it is, or I wouldn't be giving it serious consideration.”

“Sounds like the CIA came calling. If so, that shady branch of the government isn't exactly known for being full of honest, trustworthy individuals.”

I'd raised an inquisitive brow, somewhat shocked by his candor and the fact he was on target with his assessment. “I'll

make sure to change that stigma. Besides, being Rafe Witherspoon hasn't exactly been a cakewalk."

"I don't know, man. Remember what they did in 'Nam with Air America?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, that was some shit."

"No doubt. Choice is yours, bro, but if you decide to take this job, it sounds to me as though I should introduce you to my family as someone else, since Rafe may soon be a figment of my imagination."

His comment made my mouth go dry because that's exactly what would happen if I accepted the offer. "Good idea."

"I think John Pratt is a fine option."

I'd laughed while glancing out the passenger window, noticing Sims Gas-n-Go loomed ahead. Pointing toward the driveway, I motioned for him to pull in. "Need to take a leak. I like Sims better. John Sims. Easily forgettable."

"John Sims it is."

That hot, humid weekend full of delicious food (except rice, which I refuse to put another spoonful in my mouth), belly laughs, and being surrounded by a loving family was surreal. I met Brad's cousin, Cathy Lewis, and her parents, who had flown in from North Carolina for a long weekend for an early graduation celebration since Cathy had to return home for her own. For the first time in my life, I fell hard and fast for a woman, and I *knew* she felt the connection as well.

Turns out, I was right!

There was no way I would give up my only friend or ruin the chance of a solid relationship with the girl of my dreams. Two days after graduation, I provided my answer to the stiffs in suits—I'd take the job as long as I could pick out my new name. They reluctantly agreed.

I wrote a detailed note for Brad and hid it at the bottom of an empty pie tin before transferring one of Ms. Emma's famous apple pies from another on top. The note contained instructions on how Brad and Cathy could keep in touch with me via a pager I bought in Little Rock. I called and invited him over to share one last meal together. When I placed a thick slice of pie onto his plate, he noticed the paper sticking out from underneath the crust, discreetly snatched it up, and it disappeared inside his pocket in the blink of an eye.

Like I said, Brad isn't a typical jarhead.

The next four years, I traveled around the globe with my new fake identity as John Sims, Field Expert with Crop World, an international firm created and run by the CIA. I stay with Cathy whenever I come back to the U.S.

Not long after graduation, Brad landed a job managing a struggling Christmas tree farm close to Asheville, North Carolina, which is less than two hours away from Cathy. I suspect he moved to be near his only cousin to keep an eye on her because of the dangerous nature of my job.

The move turned out to be a blessing in another way after Cathy's parents, and Brad's, died in a car accident last year while on their way home from a trip to Talladega. Brad and Cathy are both only children, and all the kin remaining other than distant relatives are in Oregon.

By the winter of 1981, my cover was solid, and I met Dave Carter, my superior. He gave me little shit jobs to perform like a trained chimp for nearly two years until this one in Thailand came along, which surprised me because Dave and I *hate*—no, *despise*—each other. He hadn't forgiven me for showing him up for careless errors on my last job, but I didn't care. Had I not spoken up, good men would have died for Dave's stupid mistakes. The man detested being exposed as an idiot, and I have zero tolerance for idiots.

When this operation is complete, Dave won't be my superior anymore—I will make sure of that. I've heard rumors that field agents carry more weight about the trajectory of their careers with each successful mission, and I'll damn sure be successful in Operation DFC.

I owe that to my brothers who think the country they swore to protect with their lives has forsaken them.

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The air conditioner kicks on, pulling me out of the bad journey down dark memory lane. I shut the window and grab a fresh pair of jeans from the suitcase. Forget a shirt—it's still too hot. Once dressed, I pick up the paper sack, grab a lighter, and sit in the wooden chair to peruse the contents before burning any instructions.

The first item I remove is a plane ticket to Qui Nhon—coach, of course—which I will keep. I check it to make sure the date is the same I'd been briefed upon prior to my arrival in Thailand. Yep, I fly out of Don Mueang International Airport on June 7 precisely at 6:00 a.m. and arrive at 6:45 p.m., where I will pick up a rental car and drive to DMZ Qua Trang. I will meet with a North Vietnamese double agent, "Roger Lee," who will provide me with the coordinates of the exchange location holding rescued POWs.

Freeing nearly two hundred men costs an untold amount of money, courtesy of coffers of the U.S. government. The day of my briefing, Dave informed me the funds are in an account in Switzerland, and the account number and passcode were tattooed in Navajo above my right hip seconds after the briefing ended.

Dave said the decision to use the unfamiliar language was made to insure no one except the intended recipient

discovered and deciphered the top-secret information. Before the ink was dry, he destroyed the file, and now, the crucial information is embedded underneath my skin in vibrant, black ink.

I thought it was a brilliant idea, though am still somewhat shocked that a former North Vietnamese government tool understands the language.

Using the Navajo's unique and mostly unknown language worked for code talkers during WWII, and the tradition will continue by helping rescue soldiers from a lifetime of pain and despair from the hellhole known as Vietnam.

Besides, the design looks dark and mysterious. When Cathy saw it the day before I flew out, a plausible lie slid off my tongue with ease—it was a tribal tattoo given to me by one of the grateful farmers in the Philippines.

Thankfully, she believed me.

Rescuing American soldiers out of grimy pits in Vietnam is my life's mission, yet I'm fully aware it is also a sensitive issue for both governments. Bartering for their return costs money, and the source of the rescue funds and the intent of the mission are both unknown to the American public. They will remain a secret until someone with a higher paygrade releases the information.

No one wants to endanger this crucial operation with loose talk or create an uprising against the VC that could lead to another invasion. If anyone outside the circle of trusted players learns what we are attempting, it will create a stink bigger than Watergate or the Pentagon Papers. Worse, leaked knowledge of our covert op could blast the whole deal to smithereens, and those brave, broken men might never taste freedom again. They would vanish permanently, just as I could have a decade ago if someone hadn't risked his life to liberate me.

I will not let that happen.

The soldiers, and their loved ones, deserve better.

Pulling out the next piece of paper, irritation rushes over me as I read the typewritten words:

*When WM meets with RL and supplies the code, RL will then give LAT/LONG coordinates to the exchange location near Paracel Islands to WM, who will return to BK and page team leader, RD, at 202-555-1717, and send LAT/LONG intel. Ocean transport of the rescued cargo will begin the journey, and the cargo ship, Triumph, which contains the physical funds, will head to location. Exchange of cargo and funds will take place on board.*

“What the hell? Now we’re giving these monsters cash? Why did they tattoo the banking code on me? Why did the plan suddenly change this late in the game? I’m bypassing Carter and giving info straight to RedDog? I don’t like this. Not at all.”

On instinct, I re-read it twice, imprinting RedDog’s pager number before flicking the lighter. The ashes flutter to the floor. Rubbing the remains out with my foot, irritation morphs into anger at this last-minute shift of important details.

Reaching inside the bag again, my fingers touch a familiar object—the grip of a pistol. Before I can make sense of why a firearm was provided and how I can sneak it on the plane without getting arrested, burning pain shoots up from my palm and straight to my brain. Dropping the gun, I look at my hand, noticing several tiny needle pricks in the palm milliseconds before my vision blurs.

The room spins as my throat locks up.

Collapsing to my knees, I gasp for air, wondering what kind of poison courses through my veins as a vortex of dizziness overtakes my mind, followed by ebony darkness.