



Tears of an Assassin

DJ Power



A Night to Remember

I'd been back for a while now, and no word from Maryland where my next assignment would be, but it didn't matter. I had my three-month-old baby boy on my lap, with a bottle in his mouth, and we were watching the six o'clock news on NBC. It was April 30, 1975, and you could feel spring in the air. I'd been thinking of retiring for a while but hadn't discussed it with my wife. I had enough money in the bank, and I knew I could get a job. It probably would not be what I was doing now, but I could teach or work security at a big firm or whatever I wanted to do.

All of a sudden, Bulletin was on the screen with someone in the background, saying, "Bulletin! Bulletin! Bulletin!" Then the NBC newsman, Chet Huntley, came on the screen, and he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "Saigon has fallen. Just three years since the United States pulled the last troops out of South Vietnam, the country has now fallen to the North Vietnamese Communists. Refugees are streaming toward the United States Embassy, trying to get out of the country. Marines stationed at the embassy are now in full battle gear, and you can see smoke coming from the back of the building. Helicopters have been flying into the compound and landing on the roof, taking as many people as the chopper can hold. It's chaos. There are thousands more trying to get into the compound from the street." I sat there almost in

shock but not surprised.

The news out of South Vietnam was not pleasant the past few months, and what I could get out of my contacts in Washington that it definitely didn't look good, but I never thought they could take the country so easily.

After a few minutes trying to digest this news, I decided to put my son to bed. Getting out of my chair and walking upstairs to his room, I really started to feel a little funny. My wife had decided to go out to dinner with her girlfriends, and I was going to babysit all night, which I'd done many times when I was home. As I was tucking him into his bed, a great amount of nostalgia and remorse came over me. Here I was standing over my son—me a grown man, former US Marine Recon Sniper, and now working for the CIA in a top-secret job—crying like a baby. Tears were flowing down my cheeks, and I couldn't control them. Whaling away for what? I kept thinking of all of my buddies who had died in Vietnam and the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, girlfriends whom I had gotten to see when I was an escort bringing gallant Marines coming home on their final journey.

After I had changed my son and tucked him in for the night, I went to the bathroom to clean myself up. I then went down to the TV room and started to fiddle with the television to see if I could get any other news about Saigon, but there was nothing. I then went to the kitchen and picked up the phone and called CIA headquarters in Langley, Maryland. When I got to the operator, I gave him my code number, and I asked for special operations. He put me on hold for a few seconds, but it felt like an hour.

A beautiful voice came on the phone. "Jim? What can I do for you this evening?" Delores Elder said with a purr. She was an in-house agent who worked evenings.

"Delores, what do you know about the fall of Saigon?"

"Nothing much. All the brass has been called in from all over. They've been huddled in the war room most of the evening," she said

like it happened every night.

“Can you do me a favor? When they are on break, would you ask the admiral to give me a call at home? I’m babysitting this evening, and I’m by myself. It’s kind of important, so please don’t let him blow you off.”

“I will tell him it’s urgent, and he better get to you right away. Then you can take it from there. He’ll definitely not be happy with this and me now giving him orders. Who cares? Right?”

I thanked her and hung up. Standing by the phone in the kitchen, I tried to think of someone else I could call but came up blank. I really didn’t know why I wanted to talk to anyone, but it just seemed important that I did.

I went back to the TV room, scanned the stations, but nothing on, so I turned off the TV. I picked up a magazine and started to scan through it, but I wasn’t interested and put it down. I sat there for a minute trying to think of what I was doing, and then I turned off the lights and closed my eyes. What a life I’d had, and it all started about a dozen years ago when I met a guy.



How It All Began

I graduated high school in June of 1960 and had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I didn't want to go to college due to the fact that I hated school, and the only reason I stayed in school (besides my mother constantly on me about my grades) was I could play all the major sports, as long as I kept my marks at an average level. However, keeping them was always a problem with me. I had what the school guidance counselor was telling my parents was an "attention disorder." I couldn't keep my mind on anything for a long time, and I always had problems with authority. I was never in serious trouble in school, but I seemed to be relegated to detention all the time. So, when I got out of school for good, I just couldn't see myself going to college anytime soon. I had many offers from national schools because I was pretty good in basketball and baseball. I even got a tryout with the St. Louis Cardinals, but I just wasn't interested.

I only got to stay home after graduation doing nothing for about a week, and my dad said I had to get a job. The only job I ever had was working at my dad's office at Boston Edison, but it didn't sound as if he was going to get me in this time. I also had some problems there with the bosses, and knowing my father was the vice president probably didn't help me disposition any. I decided that I'd go through the paper in the morning to look at the want ads and come up with something

that I really wanted to do and I had to like also.

I had just come home from my tenth interview with no success when my brother came home from college, and he suggested something to me. He had a friend who owned an engineering company in Holbrook, and he called him to see if he was hiring. The next day, I was standing at the office of the president of Squires Engineering Co., which was situated outside the town of Holbrook and in the woods. It seemed that they had just got a huge contract from the state regarding a major highway from Boston to Key West, Florida, and they needed bodies to work with the surveyors. I was going to be a surveyor's helper, meaning I was there to drive the truck and lug all the equipment to the point of operation for the day. I was outside all the time, and that was good. We worked down by the Rhode Island border, and we were surveying farmland that the state had taken under "eminent domain," meaning that they can take your land for whatever reason and give you approximately 25 percent on the dollar or about 50 percent of what it's really worth. To say some of the people were not happy would be an understatement. Many times we ran off a property when the farmers came out with shotguns and fired over our heads.

I was working at Squires for a few months when one day we got a day helper. Albert had just got out of the Marines and was looking for work, and Squires put him on for a day at a time. He was a good-size guy, about six feet and a little over two hundred pounds. He said he was in the Marines for four years, and he just returned from Japan, where he spent thirteen months. All he talked about was how wonderful a "round-eye" is treated by the native girls and how everything is so cheap there. He went on and on about the Marine Corps and what it meant to be a marine and how you were looked up too by civilians as something special, way above the Army or the Navy. He just kept talking and saying that everything was great. Sometimes he wished he stayed in, but he still had time to re-enlist. I would ask him questions such as how do you go about joining up and where would you go to do this? He said all big cities had recruiters, and all you had to do was

go there and sign your name.

We got back to the office earlier than usual, and I said goodbye to Albert and went into the reception area and found a phone book for Quincy, Massachusetts. I looked up the Marine Corps and couldn't find anything with *marine* in the beginning. I was just about to give up when it dawned on me that it might come under the heading, United States Marine Corps. There it was, and the address of the recruiter was in the basement of the city library. It was now 4:30 p.m., and it would probably take me at least an hour to get to Quincy. I thought maybe I'd call them when I get home and go down tomorrow night, and then I thought if I put this off, I would probably change my mind and not go at all. Lucky for me, when I got there, the recruiters would stay at their post until 6:00 p.m. When I walked in, you would think I was the most important person they had ever seen. Staff Sergeant Reynolds greeted me with the biggest smile and strongest handshake and asked me to sit down so we could talk.

"What made you come here today to join the Marine Corps?" he said with that perfect smile.

I told him about meeting Albert and how he said wonderful things about the Marines and how he had spent his last thirteen months of duty in Japan.

"What would you like to learn while you're in the Corps?"

I didn't even know that you could get training in a job and then use it when you got out.

He then went over all the different jobs that they had, and he hit the Air Wing. He explained that the Marine Corps had fighter planes, and they also (he said we) would fly helicopters. He said, "If you go to the Air Wing, it's guaranteed that they can't put you someplace else like infantry. You can only go to the Air Wing."

I thought that was pretty good. I told him I'd take that, and we filled out all the paperwork. I signed where he told me, and then he said the magic words: "Welcome to the Marine Corps, Jim." Then he went on to explain boot camp and the infamous Parris Island. He said I'd hear

a lot of negative things about Parris Island. But I had to remember that there had been hundreds of thousands of recruits who went there, and if they made it, then I'd have no problems.

He said that he would schedule me for a physical at the Boston Navy Yard, probably in a week, but there should be no problems because he said I looked in great shape. We shook hands, and I told him I'd wait to hear from him.

I then proceeded to drive home. On the way, I was trying to think of an easy way to break it to my parents that I had just joined the most elite branch of the service. One thing about my mother was she always seemed to know when I had something on my mind or when I was hiding something. She knew this time.

"What's going on with you? Did you lose your job? I knew it, Bob. He couldn't even keep a job for more than a couple of months."

"Can I turn the TV off?" I asked with a little smile on my face.

"Sure, what's up?" My father had this quizzical look on his face.

"Well, I just did something that will probably change my life, and I thought you and Mom would like to know what it is."

My mother had a way with words, and from the kitchen, I heard, "Oh, dear Lord, what did you do now?"

I yelled out, "It's not that bad, but if you really want to know, I joined the Marine Corps today!"

"Sure, you did," she said. "What did you do that for?"

I didn't go into detail about meeting Albert and what he had told me, especially about the girls in Japan, but I did tell them I met him and how he was so proud to be a marine. I told them it sounded kind of cool, so after work, I went to the recruiting station in Quincy and joined.

Now my father, who graduated from both MIT (electrical engineer) and Harvard Business School, hadn't said a word, but he just kept looking at me in what I would say was "disbelief."

He finally said, "Are you serious about this? You know this isn't like

joining the Boy Scout or some club that you can quit any time you'd like. Don't you remember last week when we watched that movie that Jack Webb was in? *The D.I.*?"

"Yes, I remember that, and I remember what I said at the time. Anyone who joins that service has to be crazy to take the abuse they take in boot camp. I remember that, but I don't really know what I want to do and where I'm going in the near future, so I might as well go into the Marines. Maybe I can get a craft while in there. I may even want to go to college when I get out."

That was the last of the conversation for that evening, but in about three days, my mother finally believed that I joined. Staff Sergeant Reynolds called looking for me, but when he found out I wasn't home, he started talking to my mother. He had scheduled me for a physical on Monday morning at 8:00 a.m. He also said that he would be driving me to the Navy Yard, and he would be there as long as it took for me to finish, and he would drive me back.

He also told my mother that I would be leaving for Parris Island on May 31, 1962. He also said while I was away that my mother could contact him at any time to find out what was happening with me in Parris Island. Now I was never a recruiter, but I knew that they could not find out what an individual recruit was doing. However, it sounded great to distressed mothers.

The day came for my physical, and like Staff Sergeant Reynolds, I wasn't worried a bit. This should be a piece of cake, and all I had to look forward to was leaving for South Carolina and twelve weeks of hell called Parris Island.

Everything was going fine with the physical until I had to take the eye test. From a distance, there was no problem, and even the doctor said that I was very rare that I could see the very small letters on the chart. However, when they gave me the close-up test, he also said that I should be declared legally blind because without glasses, I had major problems. I told him I wore glasses, but not full time, and I never had any problems with my sight. Well, they told me to get dressed and to

wait in the reception area. Even Staff Sergeant Reynolds came in and went at the back office with the Navy doctor who administered the physical, the eye doctor, a full-bird colonel, and a captain.

They were in there for about twenty minutes when Staff Sergeant Reynolds came out with a terrible look on his face and asked if I could step into the office for a minute. "You did very well with your physical, Mr. Coleman, but there is one part of the test that you flunked, and you flunked badly," the captain said.

"Now you have a choice, and we want you to think this over before you make your decision. You can get out of going into any branch of the service by being declared 4F because of your eyes, or you can sign a waiver regarding the eye test and still become a marine."

I was sitting there, looking at all the officers, and I was thinking a couple of things. I'd told almost everyone in my hometown that I was going into the Marine Corps, and now being designated 4F was like being branded a coward—or at least in my mind, it was. The other was why would I spend a whole day here taking a physical and then not wanting to go into the Marines.

"I'll sign the waiver, but first before I do so, I have one question. They won't try to kick me out down in Parris Island, will they?"

After being assured by the colonel and signing the waiver (something they didn't print up just for me, for they had a bunch of these), they welcomed me to the Marines. They all said that I would absolutely enjoy boot camp and then Camp Lejeune right after that. I didn't know what they were talking about, especially Camp Lejeune, and I couldn't care. All I was interested in was when I was scheduled to be in Parris Island.

The date was finally finalized, and it was going to be on May 31. The day before that, my father and I went to the Red Sox game. It was something we did a lot when I was growing up. The next day, my dad drove me to the Navy Yard, where I would be with a group of guys who also were going to Parris Island. A Navy vehicle took us to the Eastern Airline terminal at Logan Airport, and we flew to Charleston,

South Carolina. We arrived at about 8:00 p.m., and we had to wait four hours for the Greyhound Bus to pick us up and drive us the remaining seventy-six miles.

While we waited, everyone had an opinion about the island. I spoke to a few former Marines, and they would tell me stories of beatings and harassment that you just couldn't believe. Finally, the bus came, and I slept for the less than two-hour ride to Beaufort, South Carolina—the home of Parris Island. When we finally arrived in front of the recruit assembly area, the front door of the bus opened, and a Marine dressed in a light tan uniform came aboard. The only item on him that made him stand out was his hat. He looked like Smokey the Bear. He didn't yell. All he said was "Gentlemen, get off the bus in an orderly fashion and stand where there are yellow footprints on the deck. Now, everyone, stand up and follow the person in front of you. Thank you for your cooperation."

That was the last thank you I heard for more than sixteen weeks. I was at the back of the bus and was one of the last ones to get off. You could hear screaming and yelling as we came closer to the front of the bus. Harry Gelson, a friend I made that day in Boston, was right behind me, and I remember turning to him, saying, "What the hell did we get ourselves into?"



Welcome to Parris Island

As we got off the bus, there were eight drill instructors standing in front of us, screaming orders and getting right in our faces. If you didn't move fast enough to suit them, they would push, pull, or just knock you down. Once we were in some kind of order, we were hustled into an old barracks where there were about one hundred bunk beds. The leader, later to find out he's our senior drill instructor, screamed, "It's now 0200 hours, and you'll be up at 0500 hours. So I would suggest you get some sleep because the morning on this day you all won't forget." Truer words were never spoken.

Up at 0500, no shower, and we were still in our civilian clothes. Breakfast was banana and a quick glass of orange juice. Breakfast lasted for about three minutes as we were about to learn and remember the time we spent in Parris Island. When the drill instructor entered the mess hall, got his food, and sat down at his table, it was when you start eating. When he finished eating and got up from his table, you better be done, with trays in the rightful place in the mess hall and with you outside, waiting for him at attention.

From the chow hall, we marched, or something like that, to the barbershop. Now they only cut recruits hair one way, shaved. I was lucky because all through my teens, I had a crew cut, so there wasn't much to cut. There were some recruits who came down here with extra

long hair. There were six barbers in the room, and they all asked the same question: "How would you like it cut?" Then they would run the clippers right up the middle of the recruits head. Each haircut took all of thirty seconds.

From the barbers, we marched to a silver shed where we were going to issue our uniforms, not just the utilities we would be wearing in boot camp but all our uniforms that we would be wearing for the entire time we will be in the Marine Corps. This procedure, unlike the barbershop, took some time. As everyone knows, a Marine always has to look sharp, and a uniform that doesn't fit doesn't look sharp. There were tailors; and they'd measure for trousers, jackets, shirts, and anything else we would need. However, at this time, we were not measured for dress blues.

Now the typical day in Parris Island was this: At 0500, we should make revelry, make our bunk, wash our faces and hands, take a leak, and brush our teeth. All these had to be done within five minutes. At 0515, we should be all out in front of our barracks ready for our morning run. We then would run down the street to a paved area that looked like a parking lot. We ran around there for approximately thirty-five minutes and then back to the barracks. At 0600 was morning chow, which again was up to the drill instructor on how long he would want to spend time in the mess hall. At about 0620, we should return to our barracks to clean up our "squad bay." The squad bay was our home away from home, and everything that didn't happen outside would happen in the squad bay. The main reason for a squad bay was that it was where you sleep, shower, write letters home, and take all the punishments directed to you or your squad. Because of these, it must be spotless.

At the beginning of boot camp, the squad bay was never clean enough for any of the drill instructors. Each one—there were three, a senior drill instructor (usually an E-6 or staff sergeant) and two junior drill instructors (one is an older, nicer type, usually an E-5 (sergeant), and the other is a real hard ass, always an E-4 (corporal) who seems to

kill you and your family at a drop of a hat)—had his own way of telling us that the squad bay looked like shit. The senior SSgt. Murray R. Cole would kick over the trash cans or shit cans in marine terms and would make us clean and scrub anything and everything. One of the juniors, the nice one, Sgt. William Lynch would just have us clean it all over again without kicking or screaming. He'd just tell us to do it again. And the third, Cpl. R. T. Johnson, who must have been the meanest DI on the island and possibly the blackest, would tip over almost all the foot lockers, shit cans, and anything else he could get his hands on. While doing this, he would scream at the top of his lungs with every other word being *motherfucker*.

At 0800, classes would start. We learned everything about military life—the equipment used and how to break down all sorts of weapons. However, the most important classes are the ones about Marine Corps history. We would start from the beginning when two battalions of Continental Marines were formed on November 10, 1775, in Philadelphia, at a place called Tun Tavern as an infantry force capable of fighting for independence, both at sea and on shore.

After the basic history, we learned about every skirmish or war that we were involved in. With all these classes, which lasted for four weeks or right before going to the rifle range, there were tests every Friday. If you didn't pass, or you just flat out failed, your ass belonged to the drill instructors; and it wasn't very pretty.

They knew how to inflict pain worse than anybody would ever believe. One of Corporal Johnson's favorites was getting everyone in the shower while putting their backs and heels against the wall and slowly coming down the wall, always keeping their back and heels against the wall. At a spot that I believe only he knew, he would scream "Stop;" and within ten seconds, your whole body would ache terribly. You'd straighten up immediately, and that was when he had you. Another favorite of all the drill instructors would be having us in in the showers again, a favorite place to punish anyone, they would have you do what they called "bends and thrusts," which is you start

at a standing position at attention. Then you squat down placing your palms in front of you and then thrusting your legs out behind and then bringing your legs in and then standing up. Now you'd probably have to do a hundred of those that don't sound difficult, but they would turn on the hot water showers and with the heat and the hard time breathing it was almost impossible to finish and again they would have you.

One of the main lessons being taught all the time is that there are really no individuals in the Marine Corps, but you work together as a team or a squad. Now to get this across so no one would forget, an example would be if someone flunked or didn't get a passing paper, it wasn't just them who suffered but everyone in the platoon. If anyone failed and didn't pass more than once, then that person would be spoken to in a very harsh manner by his fellow recruits. I don't think anyone ever failed more than once after being spoken too badly. After the afternoon chow or lunch, we would practice marching with our rifles, doing all sorts of, at the time, idiotic things that lasted about three hours.

After our afternoon marching session, we would have physical training, which would include the obstacle course and, my nemesis, the twelve-foot wall. For the longest time, I just couldn't get over it. For some reason and I never knew why, I was never punished for that, but I just had the hardest time. The drill instructors would have the two best recruits wait until a few of us who couldn't get over the wall without help be there and just put their hand together and throw us over. At the end of the training, we would have to do the obstacle course in fifteen minutes or less.

Another timed event that was really important was the six-mile run. Dressed in full utilities with a weighted pack and rifle, we would have to run six miles in under fifty minutes, which meant that one would have to do an eight-and-a-half-minute mile on average. Now I could always run long distances, and after the first few runs, I was designated with two others to be at the rear of the formation and to

make sure the slower recruits didn't fall out and made it for the full six miles. The last timed run at the end of boot camp meant that if one recruit didn't make the time, then the whole platoon failed. The first run with us being in the rear, four recruits didn't make time, and it wasn't the platoon who suffered but the three of us who didn't make sure they would make it. The DIs had us in the shower, naked, with the hot water pouring out of the shower heads. They had us to do PT until we almost passed out. After that fiasco, we made sure everyone finished the run with us almost carrying a few across the finish line. For the final run, no one failed, and we all made it to the end with a lot of help from the guys at the back.

The physical part of boot camp was easy for me, but the mental was another story. The drill instructors were always playing with your mind, and this went on for six weeks or until we were ready to go to the rifle range.

Everyone was looking forward to the three weeks on the range, but for someone who had never fired a weapon in his life, I was apprehensive. To be honest, I was a little scared of the outcome. My father's words were ringing in my head, "Listen to the instructors, and do what they tell you so you won't have any problems."

This is what you join the Marine Corps for, to learn how to fire this piece of wood you've been lugging around for six weeks. But before the firing range came a week of mess duty. All recruits have to spend a week either at the main mess hall or the BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters) or the staff NCO quarters. I was lucky and got picked to go to the BOQ on the other side of the island. It looked like an old schoolhouse that had a kitchen and three floors in which the main floor was the living room, dining room, and TV room. The other two floors had individual quarters for the officers with rank of second lieutenant to major.

Outside in another small house was the quarters for four recruits. Besides cleaning and polishing banisters, stairs, tables, and floors, we were to build a Japanese-style frame, which would hold the sign of the

BOQ. Now this wasn't any small frame but one that was fifteen feet high and twenty feet wide, and we had to have this finished within a week. One good thing was that it was already cut and put together, and all we had to do was paint it black and red. We finished this with a day to spare, and we even watched it put in the ground and have it dedicated a few weeks later.

After the week at the BOQ, we went back to our recruit barracks for a day to pack and get ready for our ten-mile forced march to our new barracks at the rifle range. For some reason, the drill instructors weren't as vocal as usual. We made the march in about three hours, and to be honest, none of us were tired. That night, for some reason, the senior drill instructor was on duty, and he called us to the front of the squad bay and had us sit. He said we could ask him any questions regarding the range and what was going to happen for the next three weeks. To be treated like half a person was something none of us were expecting. He told us that this training would be the most difficult and intense, and that there were range instructors who would be in charge, not the drill instructors. However, if there was a problem, our drill instructors were allowed to step in but had to be requested by the range instructors.

He was very emphatic in telling us to pay close attention to the instruction and to do everything the range instructor tell us. He then asked how many of us ever fired a rifle or weapon before. The amazing thing besides me was there were two other recruits, and they both came down from Boston on our flight. The senior said that we could be excellent riflemen or the worst. It was up to us to listen to all the instructions. We stayed talking to him for about two hours, and when we had no more questions, he sounded disappointed, but then it was time for our showers and to bed because now we were going to get up at 0400.



Do or Die, It's Up to Y'all

The first day on the rifle range was altogether different than any other part of our training. The range instructors treated us as if we were human. Our drill instructors were there but had absolutely nothing to say or do while we were in the classroom or what is called “snapping in.” Believe me, but it looked as if Corporal Johnson was going to have an aneurism, not being able to jump all over someone. Snapping in would last for the first week of the three-week adventure, and what it pertains to is the positions you have to be in when you fire for record.

There are four positions you have to be an expert in. The first is prone, and that means exactly what it says: You lie down in a prone position, with your legs far apart, and you fire off your elbows. Your left elbow should be on the deck, your forearm right in front of your face, and the rifle stock is balanced in the crook of your left hand. Your right elbow should also be on the deck, your right arm comes up parallel to the rifle, and your right index finger is on the trigger mechanism. This is the easiest position and one that I will be using in the future.

The second position is the sitting position, and this has to be the most uncomfortable position of all of them. You sit with your legs tucked in and crossed in front of you like a swami, and then you bend your back down so your elbows are resting on your legs. Again, your left arm holds the rifle and the right handles the firing.

The third is the kneeling position with your left leg up while kneeling on your right leg. Your left elbow should be resting on your left leg, and the right controls the firing of the weapon.

The last position is the standing position, and it looks the easiest. You just have to stand sideways to the target, with your left hand holding the stock of the rifle at the middle of the weapon and the right again is the firing hand. The only problem with this position is keeping your left arm steady and trying not to move. It may look easy, but if your left arm moves, then it's the hardest.

I was great in the prone and the standing but had a lot of work to be done on the sitting. We would have classroom in the morning, that involved learning every part of the rifle, along with the .45-caliber pistol, the BAR 50-millimeter machine gun and the grenade launcher attachment for the rifle. In the afternoon, we would just practice snapping in. The instructors were very helpful—no yelling, pulling, or hitting. They were just trying to make us the best riflemen in the Marine Corps. Now the drill instructors, on the other hand, were like cats on a hot tin roof. They kept pacing around, trying to get involved with anything that had to do with their recruits. I had to give the range instructors a lot of credit. They were in charge, and they weren't going to let anything or anyone get in their way of doing their jobs. The first week ended with no problems, and now Monday was coming and the start of the second week, and that was when we started to use real ammunition.

My instructor's name was Cpl. Jerimiah Jennings, and he was an expert marksman. He had five recruits assigned to him and always acted like a mother hen. He was always asking if we were comfortable and if we had any questions. The one thing he would keep beating into us the first time we fired our rifle was the "kick" the weapon would give us. This means when fired, the gas that is contained in the barrel of the rifle does not all go out the front but pushes back to the rear. The kick is the rifle butt slamming into your shoulder. The way to get around this is to pull the butt back into the "crease" in your shoulder

between the upper arm and collar bone. If you don't pull it in, it's going to really hurt.

Well, I thought I was pulling it in, but when I fired the first shot, the rifle came back harder than I had expected that I thought my shoulder was broken. I dropped the rifle and tried to raise my arm but to no avail. Corporal Jennings ran over to see if I were all right, and while laughing, he said, "I told you so." He again asked if I were all right and told me the pain would go away in about five minutes. He said, "You're going to have the biggest bruise in that shoulder, but believe me, you will never do that again."

He was right. I never did that ever again. I spent hours asking Corporal Jennings questions on how the rifle actually worked, if all rounds were the same, and if not, how they were different. I just wanted to know everything I could about the M-14 and how it worked and how knowing all this would make me a better rifleman. Now in between us firing at targets, we also had to "pull" targets in the "pits." The range has two spots: One is where you fire at the targets, which is flat and grassy, and the other is the target area, which is built on a mound and behind it is the pits. The pits is below the targets and down about twelve feet. The targets are on a pulley system that when you want to pull down, you rank the chain on the side; and when you push it back up, you grab the bottom of the frame and just pull up.

When the recruit finished firing at the target, whether it be one round at a time or a series, they would pull down the whole frame, see where it hit, put a white or black circle on where it hit, and then push the target up and use a black disk on a long stick to tell the recruit where it hit. One thing they taught us in the pits was not to leave the disk in the air too long because someone might be firing and hit the disk, and you could really get seriously hurt. The targets have a white background with large circles determining what marks you get. Far outside with the largest circle is worth one point. The next is about six inches from the one circle and is worth two points. Next is the three circles about six inches from the two circles and worth three

points, and it goes on until you hit the exact middle, which is the “bull’s eye.” This is a solid black circle about six inches in circumference, which from five hundred yards looks like a black dot. Working in the pits was a lot of fun because it was the only place a drill instructor couldn’t come down and yell at you. For the first time since being in this platoon, we could talk to each other and learn about our fellow recruits. We would pull butts, the actual targets are called butts, every day all the way up to the day before qualification; then we didn’t have to do it again.

On the first day of firing our rifles, I got a perfect score—250 points for 50 rounds. Corporal Jennings told me that I must have fired a lot of rifles in my civilian life because a perfect score was very rare. When I told him I had never even touched any kind of weapon in my life, he was amazed and went around and told all the other instructors. Even my drill instructors were in awe—all accept Corporal Johnson, who doesn’t like anyone, especially me. He kept telling me how lucky I was on the first day, and he’d be proved right when I take the collar in the final week heading toward the qualification, which would be on Friday.

The next week and half went perfectly, and my scores never changed. I was perfect for eight straight days, and even when we were firing the .45 pistol, I got a perfect score also. Still Corporal Johnson wasn’t that impressed, and he told me one day, “We’ll all see what kind of marine you’ll make when it comes to qualification day. My bet, you won’t even qualify as an expert.”



Qualification Day

Now there are three qualifications for rifle qualification: expert (250-220), sharpshooter (219-200), and marksman (199-180). The qualifying with the .45 is expert (345-400), sharpshooter (305-344), and marksman (245-304). Not being able to qualify, especially during basic training, is a disgrace, which can follow you all your years in the Marine Corps.

We had one recruit who was very close to not qualifying. His name was Francis Xavier Maddox from Chicago, and he really didn't know which end of the rifle fired. He was in my group of five and a good guy, but shooting anything wasn't for him. With the name Francis Xavier, he was a bookworm and just wanted to work in an office at any headquarters somewhere. His father, two brothers, and grandfather were Marines, so he had to join. I really liked FX, but he wasn't born to be a fighting marine, though he knew everything about the Corps and was proud to be in Parris Island.

Pre-qualification was fun, but something happened that was out of the ordinary. Right before we left our barracks for the range, Corporal Johnson came up to me and took me into the head. He looked around for the longest time to see if we were alone, and then he asked, "You really think you're that good with a rifle?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

“You need to do this platoon a big solid. You know Maddox isn’t going to qualify tomorrow, and we want to see what he does today. You’ll be right next to him, firing when he does, and I want you to take this. It was a round for an M-14, and put it somewhere it will be easy to get but not that easy to find if someone else comes looking for it. If Maddox needs a four or five to qualify, I want you to fire on his target and then on yours. You can’t get caught, and you need to hit the right targets. He knows that if he is four points down, he’s to miss his target completely and someone will fire on his. He doesn’t know who it is, and he doesn’t need to know. Do you understand me? Do you think you can do this, or do you let him fail?”

“I know I can do this, but Corporal Jennings is always standing over me. Can you get him away from me at that time?” I asked with some apprehension.

“Don’t you worry about him. I will take care of him. All you have to worry about is to hit Maddox’s target. Get a five, and then get a five for yourself. No problems.” He handed me the bullet and turned and walked out. I just stood there, looking at the 7.62 mm bullet and thinking how I was going to pull this off. Then it dawned on me. We are using cartridges, not individual bullets, so how was I going to get eleven rounds in my last ten shots from a prone position at five hundred yards. I was going to ask Corporal Johnson, but he was gone when I came out of the head.

Firing on pre-qualification day was going off without a hitch, and every once in a while, I would yell to Maddox to find out how he was doing. He wasn’t doing too well, and he yelled that he was down six going into the final ten shots. I yelled back to take his time and do his best. “Let me know to the end how far down you are!”

Corporal Jennings came up then and told me not to worry about Maddox. “Just worry about yourself and what you must do.”

Did Jennings say he was in on this, or was I just getting paranoid? I was starting to think too much. Just then, FX yelled that he needed five points to qualify, and he was on his last bullet. I took aim at his

target and slowly pulled the trigger. Then I turned to my target, but I had no more bullets in the cartridge. I held up my arm and yelled that I was out of bullets, and I only had nine shots. Corporal Jennings called down to the pits, and they confirmed only nine rounds was fired by lane 12.

Jennings then gave me another bullet, and as he bent down, he said with a smile, "Nice shooting. He got a five."

I then slowly pulled my trigger and got a five on my final shot for another perfect score of 250, but I had to think of a better way to do this tomorrow because that was for all the marbles.

Hot is not what I would call the weather on qualification day. At 0700, the red flag was flying. The red flag means the heat index is at a point that it could be dangerous. We were to start qualifications at 1100 hours, and it wouldn't be complete until 1600 or later. I could hear the instructors talking about the heat and saying that it was 98 right now and they were expecting the temperatures to reach at least 110. They also were saying whether or not this qualification day would be canceled. Once it started, it had to be completed, and the only thing that would change would be the time limit that was set for all rounds. Other than that, after the start, nothing would stop it except nighttime.

As we were preparing to go to our individual groups, Sergeant Lynch came up to me and put his arm around my shoulder. I knew something was up because even as friendly Lynch was in the squad bay, he would never ever put his arm on any recruit's shoulder. In his other hand, which he put in mine, was a cartridge.

"Well, guess this is your day. We all have a bet that you'll shoot perfect today, and that would make you the only one to do it every day, two weeks in a row. Platoon 227 is qualifying today also, and they have a recruit that's pretty good. Their drill instructor says he's as good as you. I guess he's shot perfect six out of the nine days, and he wants to bet some money on his guy against you. Something like a thousand dollars, so you have to hit Maddox's target and then yours. Hopefully, you won't have to worry about getting the bullet in the cartridge like

you did yesterday, but I gave you that just in case. Don't get caught and good luck and shoot straight."

On qualification day, we don't load the cartridges, the instructors do. I put the extra bullet in my right trouser pocket and proceeded to walk to the two-hundred-yard line. Now this first test was with fifteen rounds—five rounds for sitting, five rounds for kneeling, and finally, five rounds for standing, with a twenty-minute time limit. Nothing was really difficult about this, and at exactly 1100 hours, we were under way. Nothing was going to stop us from there on. Everything went well, and after fifteen rounds, I got a perfect score.

The second test was at three-hundred-yard line of ten rounds in the sitting position. Again, no sweat and perfect again. The next test was still at the three-hundred-yard line with ten rounds in the prone position and a ten-minute time limit. I started out with two perfect rounds dead at the center. Then the siren went off, and the black flag was raised. That meant everything came to a stop all over the base because of the extreme heat with temperatures at 110.

I remembered the instructors were saying nothing could stop the qualification, but they were wrong. The black flag did stop us, and we didn't move off the blocks. We laid there with a very heavy and sweat-soaked shooting jacket for over an hour. We just laid there waiting for either our instructors to take us off the firing blocks or at least to have someone bring water but nothing. I forgot this was Parris Island, with no relief at any time. After an hour, which felt like five, the black flag was lowered, and the red flag was risen. That meant we could continue.

Now the rest of the test was not as easy as before because the sweat was pouring down my face, into my eyes, and through my shooting jacket. Usually, I would have finished within five or six minutes, but this took me the whole ten minutes. I got perfect again. We then got to stand for the first time in over an hour and a half. It felt great just to stand up, but I felt like I weighed about fifty pounds heavier with all the sweat in my cloths. The next, and gratefully the last, test was at the five-hundred-yard line with ten rounds from the prone position and

with a twenty-minute time limit. I again started out great and hit the first eight rounds right in the black for forty points, but it wasn't over. I had two more rounds to fire at my target, and hopefully, there was one more bullet in there to take care of Maddox's target.

After the ninth round, I yelled out to Maddox to see what he needed. "How's it going, FX?" Nothing. There was dead silence. "FX, what do you need to qualify?" Again, nothing. I then turned to see where Corporal Jennings was, and he was right behind me.

"Hit the black. That's what he needs. Hit the black," he said very calmly, like it was nothing.

"Now or later?" I yelled at him.

"On fourteen and not sooner," he said again very calmly.

I was lying there, thinking, *Before the fourteen or after the fourteen?* I didn't want to yell that out just in case someone was standing nearby and didn't know what we were doing or wouldn't approve of it anyway. I just hit my target first, turned two or three clicks, and hit his target—both bull's eyes. Now this left one rounder, hopefully for me to finish the day. I again raised my rifle to sight in the target, and all I could see was black. I pulled the rifle as far back into my shoulder as I could and took a deep breath, letting the air out a little at a time. I started to squeeze the trigger and prayed silently, *Please be a round in there. What if the round isn't in the chamber and I hear that click of the trigger hitting the metal? What am I going to do?* I still would be a fire expert but not perfect because the round that was not shot would go as a complete miss.

I was lying there, thinking, when all of a sudden, the rifle gave the same kick as it always had. I yelled out "load five," but we had to wait to see the target come back up. There it was, as big as one could see, with the white circle within the black. It was like telling everyone on the island that I had shot perfect in the qualification round. Only a few had done it in the past, and now I was one of them.

Oh yes, FX got a score of 191 for a marksman badge. I found out later at graduation that the drill instructors divided the winnings of

their bet which was \$2,250.00. Also, the other recruit they had the bet against scored 248. We would finally meet in Chu Lai, Vietnam, in a year or so, but that was another story.

That evening, we had to pack our stuff to get ready to move back to our original barracks at the Third Battalion. It took us about thirty minutes to do this, and then we showered and get ready to hit the rack when the senior drill instructor, Staff Sergeant Cole, who was on duty that night, had us all come forward and sit and ask him anything about the Marine Corps. We were just two weeks to graduation, and this night seemed as if we were on our way to be Marines, not just a TURD, which means "Trainee Under Rigid Discipline."

The questions asked ranged from what we could expect at the four weeks we were going to stay at Camp Lejeune, if he thought of us joining the war in Vietnam, and when would we get our orders for our first duty station. He answered everything, but he stayed on the question about Vietnam the longest. Now Staff Sergeant Cole served in the Korean War, so he knew what he was talking about. He didn't think we would go to war, but he said, "We have to stop the increase of Communism in Southeast Asia, and this is the best place to have it happen. Remember, Vietnam is really small, so if we do fight, it won't last that long. And again, it's a lot like Korea with the two countries, north and south."

He also, at this time, announced the six people who would make private first class out of boot camp. My name was the last because I fired the highest on the rifle range, and this was automatic. He also told us that on the night before graduation, we would get our orders for our next duty station, not including Camp Lejeune.

That little campfire was intensive and long. Every once in a while, he would say something funny, and we all had a good laugh. This was not like the previous ten weeks. It was very relaxed and spontaneous. For the first time, I really loved being here, and I really looked forward to being a Marine.

The next two weeks seemed to fly by with all the tests we had to

take and the physical training we had to do. One of the tests we had was competing against the other platoons in the Military Marching Competition. There were eight platoons in this competition, and we finished third, which really didn't go over too well with Corporal Johnson. He was known for teaching recruits how to march the marine way, and he hadn't lost this contest since he came on the drill field. Well, that night, he was on, and we all knew that we were going to go through hell because we had disgraced him. He just said that we did a very good job, but the other platoons who had beaten us were just a little better. That time, I had come to the conclusion that there was really God, and he'd gotten into Johnson's personality, which I came to believe he had none.

The night before graduation was dedicated to making sure our uniforms were "squared away," meaning we had our shooting badges on correctly and the ones who were made PFC had their chevrons on their uniforms. My mother, father, and aunt were already here on the island and were staying at the hospitality house. I got to see them this evening for about an hour to make sure they knew what time the graduation was and where they had to go. I also told them that I was going to get a special award the next day. I wanted my girlfriend to come to the graduation, but my parents had other ideas. They said, "When you get home for leave, you can spend as much time with her as you want, but this time is for immediate family."

Graduation day is something special. As is with the most formal ceremonies in the Marine Corps, this is one of the best. During the event, there were four platoons graduating, and we all marched in separately. If we had marched in the competition the same way we marched into graduation, we would have definitely won. The pride that comes from wearing the real uniform and being addressed "Marine" is worth any of the hardships and harassment we endured the past twelve weeks. When the commanding general of Parris Island read my name and announced that I was the only recruit both here and the MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot) in San Diego that had shot

a perfect score on the rifle range for eight days straight days, even Captain Johnson applauded. The general gave me a certificate stating that I was promoted to PFC. Little did I know, what I did on the rifle range would change my life in the Marine Corps.

After the graduation ceremony, the whole day was ours, and I could spend time with my family. I took them around the whole island, showing them everything that I had done and what each place meant to me and the rest of the recruits that graduated with me. At 2000 hours, I said goodbye to my family and told them I'd see them in four weeks and headed back to the barracks. We had to be up the next morning at 0400 to have breakfast, pick up our seabags, and then get on the Greyhound buses that would drive us five hours to intensive recruit training at Camp Geiger, which is part of Camp Lejeune.

We arrived at Camp Geiger around 1500, and we got our barracks or Quonset hut, which is a lightweight prefabricated structure of corrugated steel having a semicircular cross section. What all that means is that the Marine Corps used these exclusively during WWII and had some leftover. This time, the drill instructors were really different than in the island. There was no name calling or physical contact, and they weren't called drill instructors but just instructors. You should never call them "sir" because they would say back, "Don't call me sir. I work for a living." This means the officers don't and the enlisted do. We were treated this way because now we're not recruits, but Marines. The training here was extensive, but it really seemed different. All of us would sit around at night and try to figure out what was different. We came up with "no harassment of any kind." If you did something wrong, the instructor would show you how you could do it right. There was no screaming or punching, but it seemed for us that it took a little extra time to get it right.

At the end of this training, I was going on a thirty-day leave, and then I was to report to Headquarters Marine Corps at 8th & I Barracks in Washington, DC, for my first duty station as a drummer in the Commandant's Own and the world-famous Marine Corps Drum

and Bugle Corps. I couldn't wait, but my enthusiasm would soon be curtailed, and my Marine Corps life would definitely travel another route than normal.



Washington, DC

I had a fantastic thirty-day leave where I seemed to be the hero, especially when I wore my uniform to church or some special occasion my mother wanted me to wear it. But all good things must come to an end. On the twenty-eighth day of my leave, I packed my seabag and got into my car, and off I went to Washington, DC, and Marine Corps Headquarters. I arrived the same evening. After finding 8th & I street, I parked in the regular parking lot, put on my uniform, grabbed my gear and my orders, and entered this hallowed building by which in Marine Corps history is the only building left standing when the British burned Washington during the War of 1812.

As I entered, I noticed a corporal sitting at a desk right in the middle of the lobby. As is customary in the Marine Corps, you always address the rank.

“Can I help you, Private?” the corporal said private even though I was a PFC.

“Reporting for duty, Corporal,” I said with a big smile.

“What’s the name, and what is your MOS?” he short back.

MOS stands for Military Occupational Specialty. Everyone, no matter what job or where the marine may be based as long as on active duty, has an MOS.

“PFC James Coleman, 2044862, and my MOS is 9812—the Drum

and Bugle Corps, Corporal," I answered with assurance.

"Let me see your orders. Do you have a secondary MOS, Private?" As he said the word *private*, he seemed to spit it out.

"Not that I'm aware of. Just got out of Parris Island and Lejeune," I was answering kind of sheepishly.

"Coleman, Coleman—why does that name sound so familiar? Is your family or are you famous?" Again, he was kind of spitting out the question.

"No, sir. Just plain folks that's me."

"Hey, asshole. Don't sir me. I work for a living." This time, he was rather hostile.

"One I'm sorry about that, and my name is Coleman, not asshole, Corporal," I was answering with an attitude.

"Wait here, Coleman, and let me get the OD that means officer of the day for you newbies," he said with half a smile.

"Thanks for that. It would have bothered me the rest of the night if I didn't know what that meant," I again said sarcastically.

He left the desk, and in about five minutes, the OD came around the corner. Captain Swisher was a very large man, probably about six feet three and a huge build with not an ounce of fat showing.

"We've been waiting for you, Private," he said, putting his hand out for me to shake. "You're the recruit that's broken all the records on the firing range. Someday you'll have to tell me how you did it."

I was standing there, thinking, *How the hell do you think I did it? I fired my rifle and got great marks. What a dumb question!*

Captain Swisher seemed like a nice guy, so I won't prejudge him or at least not this quickly.

"I have a feeling you won't be here too long, Private." He was still smiling.

"If you don't mind me asking, why not?"

"I do believe you'll be leaving for Quantico sometime tomorrow. That's where the competitive rifle team is based."

“What’s that?” I asked because I never heard of it.

“They go all over the world competing against different armed services in different countries. Quite an honor to be chosen,” he sounded rather envious.

“But what if I don’t want to do this?” I asked.

“You won’t have a choice, Private. You’ll do what you are told. And another thing, why do you have orders for the drum corps?”

“I’ve marched in drum and bugle corps since I was seven years old,” I said proudly.

“What do you play?”

“Drums. Mostly tenor and rudimental bass drum,” I was stating a fact, even if he didn’t know what I meant.

“Well, Private. Welcome to Headquarters Marine Corps. To your left is the barracks for all permanent non-commissioned officers both NCOs and Staff NCOs. The BOQ is across the drill field in the yellow building. The drum corps practices in the BOQ building in the basement. When you get a permanent billet, you will be put in a section of the barracks that is for all single enlisted assigned to the drum corps. But like I said before, I really don’t think you will be staying long.”

I thanked him for all the information, and he had the corporal of the guard show me to where I could sleep for the night. He also told me to be at the commanding officer’s office at 0830 in the morning. “That’s when you’ll find out what’s going on.” I thanked him again, and off I went for a much-needed sleep. I was up at 0530, getting my stuff together. Where I slept was a room with four bunks. But I was the only one there, so it was easy for me to get ready and not bother anyone in the room. I went ahead to shower and shave and ran into someone in the band, and he showed me where the morning chow was and a little bit about the headquarters.

He told me, “The drum corps usually travels forty-eight weeks out of the year, going all over the world to perform. It’s a great life, and if

there aren't any military bases where we go, then we stay in a top-notch hotel. We always eat well also, and we have our own C-130 aircraft to move us and our equipment. Usually, the Silent Drill Team goes with us." I guess I had this quizzical look on my face when he mentioned the Silent Drill Team. "You do know what the Silent Drill Team is, don't you?" And not waiting for an answer, he went into explaining what they were, "The Silent Drill Team is a squad of thirty-six enlisted men who are between the height of six feet to six feet and two and all about the same build. This is mandatory that they weigh in every Friday. They march to no cadence, and they have M-1 carbines with very sharp and polished bayonets attached. They do all the basic maneuvers but also do some really drastic things with the rifles, such as throwing them behind to another member who has just thrown his weapon. It's amazing, and it's something you must see before leaving here."

Why did he say the last sentence? Does he know something that I don't? It won't be very hard.

This place looked fantastic, and why would I want to leave? I didn't want to be on some shooting team, and I knew I didn't have a say. But I could always be bad, and then they'd have to let me come back.

After breakfast, I returned to my room and got everything squared away and dressed to meet the commanding officer. Then I would find out what was going on. It was 0815 when I reported to the CO's office. A Women Marine corporal was his secretary, and again she seemed to know who I was and why I was there. She asked me to have a seat and said, "The CO will be with you immediately."

Well, I knew what immediately meant in the Marines, even though I'd only been one since June 1. About ten minutes went by when the corporal called me and told me that Colonel Jacobs was ready to see me. I was shown to his office, and I entered. As in the Marines, there are two things you never do when meeting an officer. You never wear your cover indoors, and you never ever salute indoors where some other services do.

I marched right up to his desk at attention and said in a firm voice,

"Private First Class Coleman reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease, Private. Let me see your orders. Have you read any of these, son."

"I started too, sir. But I didn't know what it meant, so I stopped. Should I have, sir?" I inquired.

"Probably wouldn't have hurt, but I know what you're saying about understanding them," he said in a kind manner. "Do you know why you are here and not in the air wing as you were guaranteed?"

"I assume that it has to do with what I did on the rifle range in Parris Island, sir," I said, knowing what assumes meant.

"Exactly right, Private. It has to do with everything you did on the island. Now I read what you fired, and believe me that was very impressive. This comes from someone who just barely qualified with an M-1," he spoke as if he was bragging about his misadventure with a rifle.

"I'm very proud of what I did, but may I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course, what do you have to say for what you did?"

"It's not what I did, but it's what may become of me. I really don't want to become of a competitive rifle team. I would really like to stay here and be part of the drum corps."

"Well, you're not going to be part of a rifle team, and you are also not going to be part of the drum and bugle corps either. You are going to report to Quantico to go through sniper training, and then you will be on special assignment. But your home base will always be the headquarters for the time being. Do you understand?" he said with a fatherly look on his face, even though I didn't think he was much more than five years older than me.

"I really don't, sir. What does sniper training consist of?" I really wanted to know.

"Well, I can't go into details because I really don't know them. We used snipers during the WWII and Korean War, and they were very formidable and useful. There really aren't that many snipers in the

Corps now, and that's why you're not going to Lejeune or Pendleton. Quantico is the base that would be critical in this adventure. I suggest you wait to see what comes out of all this before you start hearing things that aren't true from people who don't know that much, including me."

Before Colonel Jacobs dismissed me, he did say that this process could take a few days, because in his opinion, the higher brass really didn't know what to do with me at this moment. He also said that he didn't think anything was going to happen today, so he suggested that I take in the sights of Washington and then call back every two to three hours.

I thanked him and left his office. Now at the headquarters, you couldn't change into civilian clothes on base and then leave. You had to depart the headquarters in full uniform and then change once you were outside. I decided not to change my uniform but to wear it while walking around the city. I got a day pass from the OD and then proceeded to the front gate. The MPs on the gate checked my pass with my identification, and then I passed through. As I was walking to my car in the parking lot, two men approached me. They were dressed in black or dark blue suits, white shirt, and dark tie, with both of them wearing very dark sunglasses. I would say both were in their thirties and didn't smile too much.

"Is your last name Coleman?" the taller of the two said.

"Who's asking?"

"You have to come with us," again, the tall one was talking.

"I don't think so. Who are you anyway?" I was dropping my stuff and was getting ready for anything.

"Government officials," now the smaller one spoke up.

"Who's government? If you want me, clear it with those guys in there." I pointed to the headquarters.

"We don't need to do that. If they need anything, they come to us. Let's go get into our car."

"Again, as I said before, I don't think so." I was getting set for a fight.

"Now you don't have to be so defensive. Let me show you my identification," again, the smaller one talked. He opened his coat to get his wallet and, right there in front of me, was a shoulder holster with a .45 in the boot.

Now I was never one to back away from a fight, and even better, I'd always had a big mouth when the odds seemed to be against me. "Now is that your ID, or are you trying to scare me?"

"No, this is my ID, but that is my persuader." He had a little sense of humor. He showed me an ID card. But I couldn't see it that clear up close, so I took out my glasses. Well, this kind of through them for a loop. "Are you PFC James Coleman who just graduated from Parris Island on August 29?"

"Let me see the ID again, and then I'll answer your questions."

He took the card that had a smaller picture and a huge logo at the middle with the name of his agency, Central Intelligence Agency.

Who the hell is the CIA, and what do they want with me? "Seeing you have weapons, can I ask a silly question? What is the Central Intelligence Agency and what do you want with me and how do you know who I am?"

"That's not for us to tell you. We only have to bring you to Langley, Maryland, for an interview," again, the taller one talked.

"What kind of interview? And who's conducting it? Again, what do you want with me?"

"Langley can answer all your questions, but we need to leave right away. We've been standing out here far too long."

"How far is Langley whatever from here?" I asked with still some suspicion.

"About thirty minutes on the beltway, but we have to get going. They are expecting you, and they don't like to be kept waiting," the smaller one again was talking.

"I'm not going anywhere with you two until I get some answers

to a lot of questions I have. Now does the Marine Corps know about these meetings, and who am I to meet with that doesn't like to be kept waiting?"

"The Marine Corps knows that you will be meeting with our bosses but not necessarily today."

"Well, isn't that ducky? I'm telling you for the last time. I won't go in your car, but I will follow you in my car. Take it or leave it, not open for debate." I was talking to the guy who had a cannon under his arm, and I assumed the other one had the same thing under his.

"Now you know we can make you come with us if we have to," they both talked at the same time.

"You probably can, but it will take you a pretty long time to convince me."

"All right, you can go, but we will be getting back to you. Make sure you don't talk to anyone about this because it's top security." They turned and got into a 1962 black Ford Fairlane and drove off.

Wow! I thought to myself. Now this got to be the most bizarre thing that had ever happened to me. I then turned and walked back to the headquarters and directly went to Colonel Jacob's office. I told another WM corporal that I needed to see the colonel as soon as possible because it was an emergency.

It took about ten minutes for the colonel to call me into his office. He asked me to sit down and then asked what was so important. I then proceeded to tell him about the two men who stopped me in the parking lot. I told him about the IDs and the Central Intelligence Agency and how they wanted to take me to some place in Langley, Maryland. I described the men, what they were wearing and how I saw the shoulder holster and .45 under the smaller man's arm. All the time, I was telling the colonel he had the stupidest smile on his face.

When I finished, he said, "They certainly don't like waiting for the chain of command. Now you probably will be meeting with the CIA, but not right now. It hasn't been decided what is to be done with you and how you can be used in a successful manner. The CIA is a

government organization that works outside of the United States and are involved with spies from both our side and the others.”

“Why would they want me, Colonel? I just got out of boot camp and know nothing about government or spies or anything else that has to do with this crazy stuff. Why me?”

“Because you never missed on the rifle range, and you are exactly what these people want and need. For what I can only guess, but you are becoming their top priority. But I assure you about one thing. You won’t be going down there in the very near future. They just can’t snatch you from our parking lot. This isn’t Poland. It’s the United States, and they aren’t even supposed to be active in the US. I want you to take a seat outside in the foray. I need to make a few phone calls, and I will be with you in about an hour. If you want, you can go down to the mess and get something to eat. I’m going to give you a pass that lets you into any part of this building, but it won’t let you off the premises. Right now, you can’t go anywhere. Is that understood?”

I left his office, and within three hours, I was on my way down the 95 Highway to Quantico, Virginia, and the next chapter of my short Marine Corps life. After checking in, I was escorted to a brand-new barracks, given a private room, and then taken over to the armory where I got my M-14 rifle and had a chance to look around, picking up and getting the feel of all the new sniper rifles that were being used by the US military. *This is going to be a good duty station*, I was thinking to myself. *Maybe I’ll just become a firing range instructor like Corporal Jennings back on the island and be able to complete my four years right here in Virginia. What a duty station and not too far from Boston and all the girls I know at home.* If I could see into the future and not that far into it, how absolutely wrong could I have been? And if I could have seen what the future would bring me, how far would I have run to hide from what was coming?

All I seemed to do day in and day out was test weapons from regular everyday Marine Corps rifles—mostly M-14 but also customized M-1, along with the M-1/M-2 carbine. I also became well versed in using

the M-1911 handgun, which was a modified .45 caliber. Working the rifle range wasn't the only thing I became an expert in. I would have a two-hour class three days a week in hand-to-hand combat including jujitsu, karate, and kendo. This went on for over six months, and in between, I would have classes to become an expert on reading maps and how to survive on limited food and water.

Between this intensive training, which I had no idea why, and when I'd ask, no one would tell me, I would be able to go home for long weekends and holidays. I never had to pull guard duty or mess duty, which most privates in the Corps would do, and this didn't go unnoticed with my fellow barracks mates or the private room that I didn't go without certain officers wanting to know what was going on. When someone would ask, all I said to them was "You better take this up with the CO. I have nothing to do with it." It was easier that way, but it didn't go over that well with a few of my fellow Marines, both enlisted and officers.

One of the trips I would take weekly and probably the only thing that was fun was going over to the FBI school, which was also on the marine base, and learning about facial recognition. That would be determining the real person's face and an imposter. Again, I had no idea why I had to do this, but I did what I was told and didn't question it. In my mind, I had a thousand questions. No one was able to answer them, but I came to one conclusion that made sense. I would be told what was going on at a particular time and place and not before.

Time was going fast at Quantico, but the only problem I had all the time I was there was that I didn't have any friends. I had no one to talk to and no one to ask questions. No one. I had no one. We had our trainers, instructors, and teachers, but they weren't the ones to run this because they wouldn't want to help me or they knew nothing and probably the latter was the true answer. I got along great with all my instructors and the like. I would even go out drinking with them once in a while, but when I was starting to sound melancholy or would ask a question that made them uneasy, they would all of a sudden have to

go home. It did make for a very lonely marine.

One day, when I came back from the range, I found a seabag on the other bunk in my room. I thought to myself, *Someone is either in the wrong room, or I finally have a roommate.* The latter was the right one. His name was Joseph Christian Tomelli, and he came from Rancho Cucamonga, California. He had been in the Marine Corps about six months longer than I have, and he shot 249 on the range, twice. He just came in from Twentynine Palms, a small marine base right outside of Palm Springs, California, in the desert.

Joe was twenty-two years old. He had an older brother, and his father owned and manufactured bathing suites in what Joe said, "A sweat shop in the middle of Los Angeles." He had a girlfriend and was going to get married once his enlistment was up. To say Joe didn't like the Marine Corps probably was the most underrated statement of all times. He didn't hate the Corps; he just hated the people in it and didn't hide his feelings from anyone. I talked to him for five minutes the first time, and he told me three times how the officers or anyone who had a higher rank than him were just plain morons. At first, I didn't know why Joe was here and neither did he, but in a few months, we would know everything.

Joe was going to be my spotter. What that meant was he would figure out the distance, wind speed, heat or cold variations, and relay them to me. He then would site the subject and watch to see if I hit or missed the target. If I knew I missed, I would yell "Miss," and he would then fire a round. No more than two rounds were to be shot at any one time.

Right after Joe settled in, we both were called to the office of the commanding officers by a full-bird colonel named Byers. Col. Joshua Byers was in charge of us, and we found out later there were four other Marines training for the same positions. With Colonel Byers in the room was a navy commander, and his name was Forrest John Damon. It turned out that Captain Damon was going to be the officer in charge of this operation. Colonel Byers went into explaining that

this was a new project that the Marines and the Central Intelligence Agency, which would now be known as Air America, were going to operate jointly, and that we would be TDY (temporary duty) when we were on an operation and when we were not, we would have a regular billet with the nearest Marine detachment.

We were then told by Colonel Byers that we should get ready to depart at 1200 hours tomorrow for the west coast to test the newest of sniper rifles made by Remington. It was the Remington 700 Long Range Sniper Rifle and made exclusively for the armed services. The colonel told us that we would be testing this rifle for approximately one to two months in both cold and hot weather. The first place we would be testing would be outside of Anchorage, Alaska for ten days, then we would be going to Yuma, Arizona and test it for three weeks in the desert outside of Yuma. Finally, we would be going to Camp Pendleton, California and test it on the mountains inside the Marine facility there and also Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego, California. He said we'd be in California for about a month, maybe less. We both would be shooting the same type of rifle, and we had to be able to break it down to three separate pieces on the run. Both Joe and I had no idea what he was talking about, but we both felt that getting out of here and going on the road couldn't be that tough, so we said nothing.

That night, neither of us could sleep, and we were up at first light and went to breakfast. We took our time because we had packed the night before. I made arrangements to have my car put in storage at Quantico, and then we both went to the headquarters to fill out our wills and sign a bunch of letters regarding "just in case you die." After all the paperwork, we dressed in our green uniforms, left for Dulles Airport, and hopped the American Airlines flight to San Francisco to connect with Alaska Airlines for a flight to Anchorage. Excitement was what we were feeling but also trepidation because the unknown was really driving us both crazy.

When we got to Alaska, the outside temperature was 22 degrees with the wind chill factor about -1 below zero, and believe me, it was

colder than hell. Growing up in Massachusetts, I knew what cold was, but Joe, who was born and raised in Southern California, had no idea. When he saw the snow, he was like a little kid at Christmas. The barracks at the naval base were warm, but when we got up at 0400 and had to walk to the mess hall, I thought reality set in with Joe right away. All he ever said for the entire time we were in Alaska was "How in hell can people live in this weather? It's not normal. I feel so cold."

I always hated the cold, but this was different because we had a job to do. To this day, I still didn't know why we were there testing a rifle. We would sit around the fire at night and began talking about the places we thought they'd send us, but no matter what we said, the cold weather never became part of the conversation. The only point we could make was the Marine Corps loved to put roadblocks in front of you, and we just thought this was just another one of them, trying to throw us off. We nearly froze to death and found that we weren't the only ones who didn't like the freezing weather. The rifles also didn't function as well as they should have.

We left Alaska with a big grin on our faces and thought that maybe we would never have to come up here again or at least not during the winter. We then made our way to Yuma, Arizona and the different side of the weather scale. The last we heard about the temperatures in Yuma was 105 at 1500 every afternoon. To get to Yuma from Alaska was not the easiest trip in the world. We left Anchorage and flew into Seattle, where we changed planes for San Diego. We went to MCRD San Diego and commandeered a vehicle from their motor pool with the assistance of Colonel Byers, who seemed to be keeping a very close eye on us and what we were doing.

After taking the sedan from San Diego, we proceeded to go over the Cuyamaca Mountain Range through El Centro and into Yuma, Arizona. We were to be billeted at the Marine Corps Air Station, and the training would start at 0500 in the morning. The difference between Alaska and Arizona besides the temperature was that in Yuma, we were going to have an escort who was a staff sergeant. SSgt.

Juan Rodriguez was part of the MP detachment at the air station and had been stationed there for over three years, and he knew every part of the city, air station, and especially the desert and the hills out where we would be shooting. There were always hunters in the hills looking for mountain goats or, in season, rams. We had to have them cleared from the area for the two to three weeks we were going to be out there. Rodriguez was just the man—very persuasive, especially in full MP gear. Once Rodriguez took care of the hunters, the only thing Joe and I had to do was set up numerous targets on one of the hills and then figure out how far we'd be shooting from the other hill or hills. In Alaska, putting down the targets was rather easy because it was mostly flat land or a little incline, not big hills like we were now experiencing here in Yuma.

It took us two days to lay out all the targets, which were approximately 200 on six different hills with the closest being 500 yards and the longest would be 1,700 yards. Now in Alaska, the furthest we fired was 1,300 yards, and that was rather easy. So we now wanted to see what we could do with 1,700. The manufacture had told us that these rifles would hit its target at 1,900 yards, and the military at this time didn't have weapon that would fire accurately at a distance of 5,100 feet or 180 feet short of a mile. Well, we would see the following day because both Joe and I wanted to be believers, but we both were very skeptical, if not just unbelievers.

The following morning, we got up at 0500 and went to breakfast. Knowing it was going to be in the low 100s we decided not to have a big breakfast but just coffee, toast, and banana. We met Staff Sergeant Rodriguez as we came out of the mess hall, and he said there was something urgent at the headquarters regarding the both of us. He drove us over there, and when we came to the CO's secretary, she ushered us right in.

Along with Co. Maj. Gen. William "Bull" LoPiccolo, there was Commander Damen and Staff Sergeant Rodriguez in the room. We were told to come to attention and come front and center in front of

General LoPiccalo. When we were standing there, he said, "It is my great honor to promote both LCpl. Joseph Christian Tomelli and LCpl. James Alan Coleman to the rank of corporal (E-4) in the United States Marines. Congratulations."

This is a great honor for both of us, but for what we were doing with the rifles and what we were going to be doing with Air America and the Marines, it made sense to promote us to corporal and for us to be a non-commissioned officer. It would make for less hassle down the road, believe me.

After the ceremony and congratulations all around, we got into Staff Sergeant Rodriguez's vehicle and went out to our own firing range. Now it was 0900, and the temperature at the base of the hill was 101 degrees. All we had to look forward to was about another 20 degrees hotter. Because of the heat, Joe decided not to wear his rifle jacket, which had padding on the right shoulder to stop some of the pain that comes from recoil. It took us about fifteen minutes to climb up to the point of the "shooting" hill where we could see all the targets. As I was the principal shooter, I always went first, and Joe would be my spotter, which he would in combat. After I fired five rounds at each target and he marked everything down in his book, then I would let him shoot. I would then spot and mark everything down in my book. When we were finished, we would go back to the base, take both books out, and compare the firing sequences so we could give both rifles a correct evaluation.

This day, we never got to do this. After the first five rounds I fired, I had hit all my targets and the range, wind, and height were all correct. I relayed this to Joe so he could "scope" in his rifle with my statistics, and this would make it much easier on the second shooter. I gave him the range of nine hundred yards, wind blowing at eight miles an hour, and height being five clicks of the Redfield Accu-Range Scope, which was almost perfect for what we were doing.

After Joe put everything into the sight and scope, he proceeded to fire at will, and I had the binoculars and the first round missed the

target. I yelled to him, "Miss!" He wasn't very happy, but he played with the scope for a little while and fired again, "Four in the red. Good shot."

"Son of a bitch. That hurt!" he screamed. "Almost took my shoulder off."

"You okay? What happened?" I turned and looked at him. He had this crazy look on his face, and he looked like he was in a lot of pain.

"I can't feel my hand or fingers," he said.

"It could be a muscle pinch from the rifle. You rest a little and let me fire at the 1700-yard target. Dying to try this."

I sighted in the target, adjusted the wind and height as much as I could without firing the first round, and then squeezed off a shot. I yelled to Joe, "Where did it hit?"

"How the fuck do I know? I'm in too much pain!" he cried out.

"Stop being such a fucking baby, and scope me out on the next shot. I think I hit the target on the high right side, so let me adjust." I lowered the height two clicks and adjust for the wind three clicks to the left and then sighted in the target and fired again. "What did you see?" I asked anxiously.

"I think you got a low 4 right next to the bull, but I really don't give a shit because my shoulder is killing me. I think I may have broken, or at least dislocated, my shoulder. Let's go back to the base, and I'll go to sick bay and see what it is. I can't fire anymore today," he really sounded like his shoulder would fall off at any second.

It took us about twenty minutes to climb down and get to Rodriguez's vehicle and have him drive us back to the base. We got to sick bay, and while Joe was being examined, I decided to go back to the barracks and clean both weapons and try to work on our shooting books. Tomorrow we would have to finish up the first day's shooting and continue to finish the second day also.

I finished Yuma by myself within seven days, and then I was TDY to Miramar Naval Air Station just outside of San Diego. Staff Sergeant Rodriguez drove me the 172 miles from Yuma, Arizona to San Diego,

California, but he wouldn't stay overnight. He had to go right back.

When I checked in to Miramar, the office of the guard seemed to know who I was, and he escorted me right to the commanding officer who was an admiral of the Navy. As I entered his office, I was surprised to see Commander Damon standing at the corner.

"Corporal Coleman, stand at ease," the admiral said with a big smile. "The commander here has been telling me a lot of good stuff about you and your partner, Corporal Tomelli. By the way, how is he doing?"

"I haven't spoken with him today, sir, but as of yesterday, he was getting better. He's really anxious to get back to work. He's an excellent marine, sir." I thought I saw a little smirk on Commander Damon's mouth when I said the last sentence. I didn't know there was a problem between him and Joe, but I'll have to ask him when we are alone.

"Corporal, your training here at Miramar has been canceled, and Commander Damon will fill you in on what you will be doing starting at 0700 tomorrow. I just want to say it's an honor having you on base. Have a good night's sleep. I will have Spencer show you to your quarters, and then you and the commander can talk."

I was at lost for words for that one particular phrase the admiral had said, "It's an honor having you on base"? Why would he say that to a lowly E-4 (corporal) of the Marine Corps who hasn't done anything to be honored for? Baffling!

The commander and I left the office together, but neither one of us spoke until we got to the BOQ. We then went to the commander's room.

"Just sit down and listen. I don't want you to say a word until I finish what I have to tell you, and then you can ask all the questions you want. Do you understand?" he said firmly, but not yelling like the drill instructors do.

"Yes, sir, I understand."

He started with a little small talk about how proud he was

about how I handled testing the weapons and how I just took over when Tomelli got injured, but then the whole conversation seemed to become quite serious. "Have you ever heard of the Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem?"

I shook my head, meaning I've never heard of him.

"Diem is the president of South Vietnam, and he's a catholic in a country where Buddhist is the overwhelming religion by 90 percent. He's becoming a dictator. He's executing or imprisoning Buddhists, and it's causing a lot of trouble. The North Vietnamese who are communists and a puppet to Russia are using this to get a stronger foothold in the south. Washington wants a change in the regime, and that's where you come in."

"Didn't the US put him in charge in the first place?" I asked a little sarcastically, which didn't get by the commander.

"Diem was a good man when he first took over, but he's let his Catholic beliefs get in the way of running the country. He hates the Buddhist, and almost all of South Vietnam are Buddhist. You will fly into Thailand and meet with our contacts there, and then you will make the long trek from Thailand through Laos and then into South Vietnam all the way to Saigon, which is the capital of South. One thing you can't forget is you can never be caught after you complete the mission. The United States helped put him in as president. It wouldn't look good to the world for you to be caught, and then they found out we took him out. Any questions?"

"Any questions? How about a hundred to start with. One, commander, I don't speak Vietnamese or any other foreign language. I speak Boston, and sometimes people can't understand what I'm saying. How is this going to work? Do they have people in South Vietnam that speak and understand Boston?"

"The people who will be with you all the time in the country will not only be Americans, but you'll have two or three Vietnamese who can understand people from Brooklyn. So they can understand a

Bostonian. And really, you don't have that bad of an accent. Now we have never discussed this, and I don't believe anyone else has with you. Do you think you can kill someone without them knowing you're there? This is what you've been training for, and now you can put everything you've learned and done into real-life practice. One thing you have to remember, Jim, is that everyone we have you go after is a very bad man or women, and they deserve to die."

That last sentence really put everything into perspective: "They deserve to die." Wow. Now I was going to have to think about that for a while. I'd never killed anything in my short life. To take another man's life was against my religion. I was raised a Catholic, and this man was a Catholic. Them wanting him dead because of his religion was not going to set well with me in the long run. Also being taught the Ten Commandments was something that was "beaten" into me in catechism class, and the nuns would say over and over that the worse commandment to break was the sixth commandment: "Thou shall not kill." It didn't say you could kill bad guys because it was okay with the Marine Corps, the CIA, and every free country in the world. The commandment didn't say, "Thou shall not kill, except Ngo Dinh Diem," who just happened to be the president of South Vietnam and a Catholic.

Watching cowboy movies, when the cowboys shot the Indians and when the police shot and killed the bank robbers, I said to myself, "I can do that." But this wasn't the movies; this was real fucking life. I really didn't know if I could do this. Was he married? How many children did he have? Did he really believe in what he was doing? What kind of guy was he, and would I like him if we met? Oh, the questions I had, but they were not for Daman. They were for me personally, and I had to make a decision soon.

"You haven't said anything yet, but you really have a strange look on your face," the commander was leaning in, speaking in a very low tone now.

"I really don't know where to start. I've never killed anything or

anyone ever, and I really don't know if I can. This has been sprung on me rather quickly."

"What the fuck do you think you've been training for all these months? Are you that naïve or just plain stupid?"

"I'm neither naïve nor stupid. I knew the training had something to do with killing, but I thought it would be in a war like if Vietnam kicks off. I didn't think I would have to go out to some god-awful place in South Vietnam and shoot someone at the back. All I can think of right now is Jesse James."

"What the fuck does Jesse James have to do with this?" he was now getting louder and getting very upset with me.

"Don't you know the story of how Jesse James was killed? He was hanging a picture in his living room and was shot at the back by one of his gang, Bob Howard. That's all I can think of that I won't be any better than that dirty polecat Bob Howard."

"Jim, please what the hell are you talking about, and where the hell did Bob Howard come from? You're not him and goddamn Guevara isn't Jesse James. James was a schoolboy compared to what Diem is and what he's done to thousands of Buddhist who resisted to get in line with his regime. He is responsible personally for condemning over five thousand Vietnamese to death by firing squad. Do you remember what I told you and Joe when we first met and that you'd be TDY to the company? I said there would be some things you're going to be asked to do that you may not be too agreeable in doing. Well, this is the start. All I can tell you that the company or myself would never ask you to take someone out if we didn't think it was for the good of the United States of America and the free world. Now do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I understand what you're saying, sir, but you're asking me to do something that is all together against what I've been raised and taught what was right from wrong. I hear what you're saying about Diem, and I'm really trying to rap my head around this. But it's going to take me sometime to accept this."

“Then what the hell did you join the Marine Corps for? Didn’t the drill instructors tell you guys in boot camp that you’ll be learning how to kill someone? What do you think the rifle range was for? You learned to fire an M-14 for three weeks for the main reason to be able to *kill* someone who is trying to kill you,” now the commander was in full 100 percent on top of his lungs.

“But is Diem trying to kill me, Commander?”

“Don’t be a wise ass, Corporal. Diem isn’t trying to kill you personally. If we allow him to keep going in this manner, the war in Vietnam will be a lot closer than it is now. He’s persecuting the Buddhists, shutting down their temples. There are a hell of a lot of Buddhists, and there seemed to be a temple on every street corner. There are more Buddhists in Vietnam than any other religion combined.” Now he was trying to convince me through religion. “Jim, everyone has or should have the Freedom of Religion and not worry about being persecuted.”

“I do understand what you’re saying and I agree with everything you’ve said, but to kill someone in coldblood is something that isn’t going to be easy to do or at least it isn’t for me. But I will try to get over my beliefs and do what I’m ordered to do,” I tried to sound as positive as I could, but it wasn’t easy.

“Try to do. What the fuck is “try to do”? You’ll do what you’re ordered to do and do it the best you can or I’ll see your ass in the brig for the rest of your life, you ungrateful piece of shit.” Now he was coming out of his chair. “I would recommend that you get the fuck out of here and go to your quarters and think all night what the consequences will be if you refuse to do this. Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

I walked over to the NCO barracks and saw the corporal in charge, and he showed me to a spare room they had. I sat on the edge of the bed for a while, and then I decided to make a call to the only one who would tell me the truth.

“Hi, Dad. You got a second? Yes, I’m fine, and I’m in California, at

a place called Miramar Naval Base about ten miles from San Diego. Just got in today, and I should be here for a few days. Only God knows where I'm going. Dad, I need to ask you a very serious question, and you can't ever tell anyone I asked this of you. Do you think it's a sin against God if I killed a man in coldblood? Let me explain without giving you the details. I may and it's only may have to go and shoot a man who is persecuting people because of their religion, and he may even start a war that the United States will be pulled into. This is what I've been training for, and now they may need me to do this. Now, is this right or wrong, Dad?"

"I won't ask the particulars, but the only thing I will say is be very careful and make sure you come back to us. Now to answer your question, the government or the Marine Corps would never ask you to do something that wasn't right. If they say do it, then do it. You're in the service of the United States, and I believe God understands this and will never hold it against you. Go do it and come back quickly. Be careful, and I definitely will not tell your mother. She'll have a heart attack if she knows."

My dad handed the phone over, and I spoke with my mother for a while. Then I told her I had to go, and I said I loved her and would be seeing her soon and hung up.

I decided to go to the NCO Club to get a steak or something filling, and then I would go talk to the commander again. I thought I'd have an appetite, but when the steak and fries came, I just took three bites. I did drink my Pepsi. I paid the bill and decided to go for a walk, and as I kept walking, I came up on the base chapel. I went in, and there was a man standing in front of the altar. I asked him if the Catholic chaplain was around. He said that he was off base that evening but asked if he could help me.

"Well, I'd like to speak with a chaplain, if I could," I said without hesitation.

"Well, Corporal, I'm an episcopal minister and a chaplain in the Navy, if that helps," he said in a sarcastic but nice voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to offend you," I said sheepishly.

"No offense taken, son. What's on your mind? Remember, this isn't a confessional, but what you say to me stays between the two of us. My name is Lt. James Neal, and what is your name, Corporal?"

"James Coleman, sir, but most people call me Jim," I answered again a little sheepishly.

"Okay, Jim. What can I do for you?" he asked with conviction.

"Well, sir, I have a very serious question, and I need an answer so I can give another answer to my commanding officer. I have a top-secret assignment coming up, and they want me to kill someone in coldblood. I'm wondering what God would say?" I stated the fact directly, but I didn't expect the answer I got from the chaplain.

"How the hell does anyone know what God would say? I know what I would say, and I think I'd know what Lieutenant Murphy, the Catholic chaplain, would say, but you want me to tell you what God would say? Are you retarded? Only God knows what God would say. Now if you're interested in what I think and would say, then I'll tell you. But to ask what God would say, no, I can't answer that because I just don't know." He took a breath for the first time since he started talking.

"Maybe I didn't put it the exact way I meant. Do you think God would think this was a very serious sin?"

"Look, Jim. You're in the Marine Corps, and they are going to ask you to do a lot of things that are out of the ordinary when you were a civilian. We are in a time of war. We have planes flying bombing runs in North Vietnam to aid the South Vietnamese, and we aren't at war with them yet. I don't believe God thinks anything bad about the pilots or bombardiers that are dropping the bombs on the bad guys. Now I don't know what your orders are, and I don't have too. I'll give you my answer, and I believe this as God is my judge and he is you know. God knows you have a job to do, and he does not hold anything against you as long as these are your orders and you carry them out as written and you don't deviate. Meaning, you don't start shooting everything

around that you weren't ordered to do. Does that make any sense to you?" Again, he took a breath.

"I think so, sir. What you say is that as long as I'm ordered to do a certain task, then I must do that task, only that task, and there is nothing wrong with that, right?"

"Exactly. You're in a profession that is going to require you to do things that you're not used too, but you better get used to them because it sounds as if this isn't going to be the only 'request' they will have. Now get the hell out of here and get some sleep. You look exhausted." He then shook my hand.

I thanked him, but Marines never salute indoors. So I just turned around and left, feeling much better than I did when I went in there. I went directly to the BOQ and asked if the commander was in. They buzzed his room, and he answered and then told the seaman who was on the desk to send me up.

When I got to his room, I knocked and then entered. Commander Damon was standing by the bed in his T-shirt and boxer shorts. He was putting his trousers on as I stood there.

"What did the chaplain say?" he said matter-of-factly.

"How did you know I went to see a chaplain?" I was a little agitated.

"Well, you've been gone about three hours, and I assumed you were going to call your parents. Not getting the answer you were looking for, you then went for a walk and then to the chapel. In the chapel live the chaplains, so I figured out you spoke with a chaplain. How smart am I?" he said with a grin.

"You either had me followed, or you called around to see where I was. How smart am I?" I said with no smile on my face.

"I guess you're smarter than you look. Want a drink? Oh, I forgot. You don't drink. More for me." He went to his desk and pulled out a glass and bottle from the bottom drawer and poured himself a good one, three quarters full. "I had one of my guys to keep an eye on you. When you left me, you were in bad shape mentally, and with what,

you knew I just had to know where you were. Nothing personal, but security is the word.”

“I understand, and after my talk with the chaplain, I have no problem fulfilling my orders.”

“I really didn’t think you would, even if you didn’t talk to anyone. Now I have a surprise for you. Tomelli will be here in the morning, probably around 1100. He’s been cleared by the doctors, and you two will finish you training for the next ten days and then on to Thailand. Do you have any questions for me, as long as it’s not about religion?” He let out a loud laugh and took a giant drink from the glass.

I told him I had no questions, and I was thrilled that Joe was coming back. After I decided about accepting this assignment, as if I had a choice, I was thinking of being in a strange country with people I didn’t know, doing something that I really didn’t understand. But having Joe with me would be good. He was someone I knew and trusted.

Joe arrived exactly 1100, and after five minutes of horseplay, we got down to business. It was decided that Joe would no longer test his rifle, but only be my spotter for this assignment. We went out to the range at Camp Pendleton, which is about fifty miles north of Miramar, at 1500 hours and started firing at targets set at 1,500 yards when the sun was high in the sky. I kept firing for about three hours, and then we got into our vehicle and started to drive back to base. But before we left Pendleton, we stopped at the NCO Club and had a hamburger and fries with a giant chocolate milk shake.

We got back to Miramar at 1845, and when we stopped at the entrance to show our IDs, the sergeant on duty took one look at my ID and said, “Some big, short navy commander is having a fit looking for you two. You better go over to headquarters immediately because he said he’d be there all night.” He was almost laughing.

“What the fuck did you do know?” Joe asked with a grin.

“Hell knows. Lately, all I have to say is hello to him, and he gets all bent out of shape. We should just say fuck it and go to the club for

dinner. What do you say to that?"

Well, I really didn't finish my thoughts to Joe because an MP jeep pulled up right in front of us. A captain stood up and yelled, "Corporal Coleman, you will follow me, now." And this wasn't a request, but a direct order.

I waved and stepped on the gas. I knew exactly where we were going, but I really didn't know why, and when I found out, I thought I'd have to change my skivvies.

"Can you think of anything we did wrong from leaving here and going to Pendleton? He didn't say what time to be back, and we usually don't report to him anyway. As usual it's probably something stupid and unimportant. Knowing him, he blows everything out of the world. I think he hates Marines reporting to him, knowing how we all feel about 'squids.' If I wanted to answer to a fucking commander, I would have joined the fucking Navy. This absolutely blows. Can't even get a second without him being on our ass. I'm going to tell him off."

"Sure, you are," Joe said with a grin. "You tell him off, and he'd get great pleasure in throwing you in the brig for a week or so. I really don't think he likes you, and he doesn't really know me."

The captain in front of us pulled up in front of base headquarters, got out of his jeep, and directed us to the next parking space. If he had taken out his sidearm, it wouldn't have surprised me. Parking our vehicle, we got out. I was tempted to put my hands way up in the air just to piss this captain off, but after looking into his eyes, I decided it wouldn't be a good idea.

"The commander is in the admiral's office, and they are expecting you two. Get going now." I turned, got in his jeep, drove off, and turned the corner just as I gave him the finger.

"Well, it was nice knowing you, Jim," Joe said, almost laughing.

"Fuck you. You'll be in the same cell as me, you asshole."

As we entered the office, I tried to get a read off the personals faces, but they were like stone, as they turned around as we entered. Walking

up to the wave that was at the front desk, I went to say my rank and name, but she cut me off. "They are expecting you two, and you can go right in without me announcing you. Good luck," she said with a sympathetic smile.

Good luck. What the fuck did she mean by that? Good luck.

"Stand at ease, gentlemen. How did the range go today?" the commander said with a light look. He didn't look like he was that pissed.

"Went great. 1,700 yards will be no problem on a flat service. Fired about 300 rounds, and I would say when I was snapped into the right coordinates, I didn't miss. Isn't that right, Joe?" If I was going to be in trouble, I'd take him with me.

"No problem." He was indeed a man of many words.

"Did we do something wrong by stopping at the NCO Club and getting a burger? You didn't specify what time you wanted us back, and ever since we came to the front gate, it seems like we are on our way to the brig."

"Not at all. No trouble, but we have an emergency, and you two will be leaving here tomorrow morning for Vietnam. You'll fly to Alaska, where the plane will refuel, and then you'll go to Japan, where again, you'll refuel, and then to Upon, Thailand, where the Royal Thai Air Force is based. Once there, you will meet with six members of your team. Two of the six are Montagnards, which means 'Mountain People' from the Central Highlands of Vietnam, and they hate the VC or Viet Cong. Best trackers they are in the region, but they don't use rifles or pistols. They use cross bows with arrows."

"Are we using people from the dark ages?" I said with a concerned voice.

"Not at all. They can hit a bull's eye from five hundred yards and never miss, but the best thing about them is that they can smell the VC from miles away. You'll never get caught as long as they are with you," he said with confidence.

“Well, I hope you’re right about that. Who are the others in our ‘team’?” A little sarcasm never hurts.

“You’ll have two from the company who are very good with weapons, and then the other two are a Korean and a South Vietnamese farmers who both are paid by the company. Once you meet them, you’ll be able to rest for a while because you’ll be walking all the way to Saigon which is 419 miles over hill and dale.” He let out a laugh.

“How long do we have to do this?”

“It is now October 4, and it has to be done by November 2, because of elections. We wanted to drop you by helicopter closer to Saigon, but there was a chance that you’d be seen or captured. Then all shit would happen. So now you get to walk. Lucky guys.” He closed the book on our transportation. “Now let’s get to the operation. Diem stays in the city most of the time, and he’s guarded by at least six men at a time. Every morning at 0745, he leaves the presidential palace and walks about five hundred yards to the Catholic church for daily mass. When he comes out, he sometimes stops and shakes hands with the people, or he will talk to the priest who said mass. That’s when I would suggest you complete the mission,” he said while pointing at the map that was on the table.

“Why don’t you just say kill him instead of complete the mission,” I said. I was a little agitated.

“Will it make you feel better if I use that phrase? Does it bother you Joe when I use complete the mission?” He turned and looked at Tomelli.

“It doesn’t mean anything to me, but I can see where it bothers Jim. If you are going to kill someone, then don’t beat around the bush and say kill. The other way doesn’t make it feel any better.” It was good for Joe to show some balls.

We went over the maps and the president’s particular quirks and what he liked to do daily and what to look for. We also went over the area around the palace and the church and what kind of buildings or hills or mountains or any particular place that look like a great place

for the short. There are a number of buildings across from the church, but they are only two floors, and he was not sure that would be tall enough. I didn't know the commander was such an expert.

"I don't mean to sound like a wise ass, but I'm the shooter, so I will pick the spot. I do appreciate your enthusiasm." I believed he knew what I meant.

"I know you're the expert, but I just wanted to let you know what was where and what you had at your fingertips," he said, sounding a little hurt.

"Thanks. I appreciate it, but this is my first time. And with everything you're giving me, I'm getting a little confused, but it'll work out fine."

After we finished with everything, the commander took us to the Officer's Club for dinner. While we were eating, he said matter-of-factly, "Oh, I meant to mention this to you. You can't wear your uniforms. No ID cards or anything on you that identifies you as Americans. We don't want this to come back to us if you're killed or captured."

This was the perfect place to finish our meal, thinking of never coming back from a country I've never heard of and really would never care if I ever saw it again. Little did I know that this was only the first time I'd be in this country, and in about six months, I'd be staying here for over two years.

We finished our meals and walked back to the BOQ and the commander's office. When we arrived, there were new clothes for us. The shirt and trousers were made of silk fabric, very loose and very black. Instead of boots, we were to wear sandals made of rubber. There was a soft grey cover like a small fedora. The commander told us this was what the natives wore, and when we landed, they would give us paint to put on our skin to take away the Irish white. I argued that fact. If we were going to walk four hundred miles or so, the sandals were not the best. We should keep the boots because of comfort and protection against bushes, thorns, and snakes. He finally agreed, but

he told me to make sure we took along the sandals.

“Before you two go, let me reemphasize how careful you must be not only in Cambodia but most of all in Vietnam. There will be Viet Cong patrols all over the south. The Viet Cong are the enemies, and most of them are farmers. They come out at night or when they need a suicide squad to come into Saigon and blow up something. They are very smart, they have no fear, and they really hate the existing government in Saigon. If you do come upon one of these squads, do not engage them under any circumstances. If you are seen, then run and get away from them. Do not and I repeat . . . do not engage. Do I make myself clear?” He was very emphatic about this.

I wondered why there was no engagement because usually you killed everyone, no one would know what was going on. What he said would apply, but sometimes it couldn't be helped.

We checked our gear, packed the rifle and cartridges we would need and then said our goodbyes to the commander and got into the truck that was waiting for us out back. The truck had the windows blacked out, and I said to Joe, “It's starting now. All the secrecy that comes with doing a job like this.”

“I just don't understand with ‘don't engage if you're seen.’ What does he expect us to do? Run through the whole country?” Joe made sense, but I didn't want to contradict the commander's orders or just not right now.

The runway in Miramar was on the south end of the base. As we approached, you could see the huge plane sitting on the edge of the runway.

“That's a C-135C Stratolifter. They call it a speckled trout, and it's just like the plane the president has. You guys must be really important,” said the ensign who was driving us. An officer for our driver, who'd believe that?

“It's really big. Do you know anything about it? How far can it fly, and how fast?” All of a sudden, Joe had become curious about planes.

“I know the air speed is 580 mph, and on one tank of fuel, it can

travel 3,449 miles. I know that it's 136 feet long, and the wing span is 131 feet. I think its weight is over a hundred thousand pounds, and it costs a whole lot of money," the ensign said with pride that he knew all these things. He could have told us anything, and we would have believed him because we really didn't care or at least I didn't. My main concern was would it stay in the air for where we had to go.

We got out of the truck, took our equipment, and started toward the plane. As we were walking toward the stairs, it dawned on me that we had no identification. If we were asked, we couldn't deliver, and God knows what would happen. There were two Marine MPs standing at the foot of the stairs, and as we approached, they snapped to attention.

"Have a successful flight, sir," one of the MPs said to me. I usually would give him some sarcastic answer like, "I'm not an officer. I work for a living," but I didn't think this was the place for jokes. This was a joke because most of the officers I'd met since being in the Marines were really hard workers.

"Thank you, Sergeant. We hope too." But he didn't salute, and neither did I.

Once on board, we came to a quick conclusion that this wasn't like the C-130 we'd both flown on before for the Marines Corps. There were regular airplane seats that went back so you could sleep. We also had a navy steward on board who would make us sandwiches and coffee, but no alcohol. We got on board about five minutes when the pilot came out of the cockpit and came up to us. "We'll be taking off in about fifteen minutes. We're waiting for one more person. Just relax and have a good flight. It will take us about four and a half hours to get to Alaska, and we'll be landing at an Air Force base in Anchorage. Have either of you two ever been to Alaska before?"

"This is the farthest point I've ever been so. As soon as you take off, it will be the furthest I've ever been," I answered with enthusiasm.

"Will we have any time to see the sights?" Joe asked with tongue

in his cheek.

“No, sir. You won’t even be able to leave the plane. This flight is top secret, so no one off and no one on until we reach Thailand.”

“Will you be flying us all the way to our destination?” I asked quizzically.

“No, sir. You’ll be getting a new crew in Alaska and then another crew when you land in Japan right outside of Tokyo. Then from there, you’ll travel to another Air Force base in Ubon, Thailand.” He was acting really proud that he knew all of this.

“If you are leaving us in Alaska, how come you know all about our flights and where we will be landing?”

“All the pilots and copilots on this mission know everything about the other flights, just in case we would have to continue to the next landing. It’s just SOP, you know, Standard Operating Procedure,” he answered with a smile.

Well, I didn’t know that, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. “Makes sense to me. Do you know if it will be the same on our return but in reverse?”

“I don’t know anything about the exit plans, but I doubt that you’d be taking a C-135 on return. I don’t know, but it’s just my guess. If you don’t have any questions, I’ll get back to work,” he said. Then he turned and walked back to the cockpit.

“Who are we waiting for? The commander?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think it’s the commander because he could have come with us, but you know him. He likes his grand entrances, so it wouldn’t surprise me,” I answered him.

We just sat there until the steward asked if we would like something to drink, and we told him we want soda like Coke, Pepsi, or the like. In a minute, he brought back to us our Coke and a dish of mixed nuts. It looked as if we were first class on this flight.

Just as we started to get comfortable, we heard someone come in through the back entrance of the plane, but we didn’t turn around.

Just then, the engines started to turn on, and all the doors were closed. Just as we were going to stand, this blond, blue-eyed, six-foot man was standing over us.

“Sean Callahan,” he said with his hand out. “Which one of you is Jim?”

“I am.” I took his hand, and he shook it enthusiastically.

“I understand this is your first assignment for both of you?” he said it with a question and not accusingly.

“Yes, sir, it is,” we both answered at the same time. “Will this make a difference?” I inquired, almost waiting to start an argument.

“Not at all. Forrest tells me that you two are the best, so if he says that, then it must be fact. He’s never wrong.” He was still smiling like his face was stuck.

“Forrest, you mean, Commander Damon?” I knew who he was talking about, but I wanted to show a little respect to the commander.

“Yes, oh I forgot you two are in the Marines, so you wouldn’t ever call him by his first name. Sorry about that.” He really showed that he was sorry to have taken liberties.

“No problem. Still can’t get used to civilians calling an officer by his first name,” I said, trying to calm the waters.

“No problem. Why don’t you two give me a little info about yourselves outside and probably before you joined the Marines?” He was still smiling while talking.

We went through the quick version of our lives, and then he asked why we were picked for this assignment. “Beats me. I couldn’t tell you why, but the commander was adamant that we do this, and you know him, you can’t argue with him when he has his mind made up.”

“You can’t, but I can. He’s a great guy, but sometimes he should ask people for their opinion before assigning two rookies to a very difficult mission,” he said without a smile.

I stood up with that and got really close to him. “Are we going to have a problem? We didn’t ask for this, but it was given to us. And when

you're in the Marines, you don't argue. I'll tell you one thing. There is no one that you know that can fire a rifle with accuracy as I can. I have no doubt in my ability or of Joe's, and if you have a problem with us, maybe you should ask for another assignment. We'll get someone in here that we can work with."

"Easy, now. I just wanted to see what kind of man I was going to work with. I don't need or want a wimp when it comes to putting my life on the line. I've known Forrest for a long time, and I had or have any doubts in his ability to pick out the best when it comes to what we do. Jim, I meant no disrespect to either you or Joe, and if the commander says you're the aces, then that's all I need to know." And he stuck his hand out for me to shake it.

If I really wanted to be an asshole, I could have just left it out there and just turned around. But I grabbed his hand with mine and shook it vigorously, saying, "No problem, whatsoever, but you really had me going for a while there."

Just then, the steward came up to us and asked that we be seated and buckle in because we were about to take off. I sat next to Joe in the middle of the plane, but Sean went to the front and sat by himself. I thought that to be strange, and I said to Joe, "I thought everything was okay with us. How come he went to the front of the plane? I tell you right now if we have a problem with him on this flight, I'm going to ask for a change when we get to Korea, or I'm not doing this shit. Don't need some fucking civilian getting all over me."

"Jim, you're working yourself up for no reason at all. I tell you that I believed him when he said he was testing us to see what we would say or do. Maybe he's got some quirk about sitting up front. When we level off, just ask him."

As we started down the runway, the plane was picking up speed, and you could hear when we left the ground. All of sudden, we felt like we were going straight up in the air. After about ten minutes, we leveled off, and the steward said we could get up and walk around if we wanted.

Just then, Sean came back to where we were sitting. "Great takeoff. I love it when it goes straight up." He was talking like a little kid.

"How come you went to the front of the plane instead of sitting with us?" I asked, sounding aggravated.

"Oh, I should have told you. I read somewhere years ago about plane crashes. It seems that the percentage of survivors in a crash are sitting in the front of the plane, and the worst place to sit is in the rear. It's kind of a thing I have."

"What about the middle?" Joe asked urgently.

"About sixty to forty, but you're going to die." He laughed like that was the greatest joke in the world. I looked at Joe, and he was as white as a sheet.

"You going to throw up?"

"No, but I'm sitting up front from now on. Why tempt fate," he said with a shake of his head.

The steward came back and told us that we should get really comfortable because this first leg was a long one, and then the next two would be worse. Hopefully, when we landed in Alaska, they could possibly refuel in a hanger, and we could get out and stretch our legs on the ground, but I didn't bet on it. This was time restricted, so it was in and out. We asked about food, and he said that they had box lunches from Miramar on board. They probably would get the same things, not the same meal box lunches, on the remaining legs. We went back to our seats. Joe took one row, Sean Callahan took another row, and I took the third.

The first leg of our journey was 2,453 miles from Miramar to Anchorage, Alaska, which took four hours and thirty minutes flying time. We left at 0430, and we arrived at 0800 Alaska Time, which I found out was an hour behind California. As we taxied to a far position on the tarmac, the steward yelled to us to keep the shades down on the windows. When we came to a stop, the doors of the plane were opened, and a set of stairs were pushed in place at the rear door. As we paced up and down the aisle, a three-star Air Force general entered

the back of the plane.

I jumped up as soon as I saw him. "Attention on deck." Both Joe and I snapped to attention.

"At ease, Marines," the general said a matter-of-factly. "I've been asked to come on board to make sure you both are all right and if there is anything you need?"

I thought to myself, *They're sending a three-star Air Force general to see if we needed anything. Wow!*

He said that if there was anything we needed or wanted, the sergeant here—pointing to the steward—knew how to get in touch with him immediately. He turned and started toward the door.

I snapped to attention and said again, "Attention on deck."

The general got to the door and turned with a quizzical look on his face and asked, "Are there only three of you aboard?" And he left without waiting for an answer.

"Now that was very strange," I said to no one in particular.

"How's that, Jim?" Sean asked.

"Well, I haven't been in the Marines that long. Only a year and a half. I graduated from Parris Island the first of September 1962, and now it is October 1963. Now I know that no three-star general has ever come down to a plane and gone aboard to see if two corporals in the Marine Corps needed anything. All I have to say is we must be really big shit for this to happen."

"It's not you two. It's the mission. The general doesn't know what it is, but he can imagine it's huge because here is a Boeing C-135 Stratolifter worth more than forty million dollars carrying two Marines and a civilian to God knows where," Sean said. "It's not you. It's the mission," he said again like no one heard him the first time.

We could hear the engines starting up, and the steward yelled out that everyone must be in their seats. Sean and Joe moved to the front of the plane and took seats across the aisle from each other. I sat down in my regular seat and wondered what was going to happen after all

this would come to an end. *Once we get Diem, what then? How are we going to get out of Saigon or, better still, get out of Vietnam? No one has spoken of any exit strategy, but neither have we. Sean is the lead CIA agent on the mission, so I guess I'll press him to see if he knows how we are going to get out of there.*

The next flight was going to take approximately eight hours, so I decided I'd try to get some sleep. I pushed the seat back and closed my eyes. I was there for about two minutes when the steward came up to me and told me that there were beds at the back, and I could use them. I got up and went at the back where there was a curtain from wall to wall. I pushed back the curtain, and there were four small bunks bolted to the floor. They were already made up, and I decided to take the one on the far right. I took off my boots, shirt, and trousers and laid down with just my boxer shorts and socks.

I didn't think I closed my eyes for a minute, and I was fast asleep. I didn't think I was asleep for a long time when the steward came and shook me and said, "We will be landing in Tokyo in about thirty minutes. Would you like coffee or tea or juice or all three?" he said with that same stupid smile on his face.

"I'd love some coffee and orange juice if you have it," I said while putting on my trousers.

"Have both, and I'll bring them to your seat. Would you like a muffin or roll?"

"No thank you, just coffee and orange juice." I finished dressing by tying my boots.

I went into the small head they had on the plane. On the counter were three small bags with our names on them. I opened the one that had my name, and in it were toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, wash cloth, razor and cream, comb (don't know why both Joe and I had very short hair), and a box of condoms. I came to learn later that all bags or packages that had toiletries from the service always had a box of condoms. I didn't know why then, and I didn't know why now.

Every time I would ask someone about this, they would just smile

or laugh and say, "Just because." I'd come to the conclusion that no one in any of the branches of the service had any idea why in a bag or box of toiletries there would be a box of three condoms. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on the person who packed these items.

The landing in Yokota Air Base right outside of Tokyo was terrific. The new pilot, one I never met, set the plane down as if it were landing on an eggshell. No bouncing or swaying, but it was as if we had never landed. We again taxied to the far end of the runway, and the pilot shut the engines off. As soon as he did this, the doors once again opened, and the stairs were rolled to the door.

Once again, a senior officer came aboard, and Joe and I again jumped to attention. This time, it wasn't a three-star general, but only a full-bird colonel. Again, he asked if there was anything he could get us or anything that we needed, and once again, I said nothing, but Joe jumped in this time.

"Colonel, would it be possible if we could go down to the runway and get some air? We've been cooped up on this plane now for almost twenty-four hours, and it's getting a little stuffy in here. We would really appreciate it."

"Let me see what I can do." He turned, took out his radio, and started speaking to someone on the other end. All I could hear was his conversation, and he said, "I don't see any problem. They've been on the plane for over twenty-four hours, and it looks as if they are going to be on it for another twelve hours, if not longer. I think we should let them stretch their legs for ten or fifteen minutes. It's at the end of the runway, and nothing is around. What do you say? Okay and thanks." He turned and said to us, "Okay, you guys can go down the steps, but go right under the stairs and try to stay in the shadows. I know it's past 2000 hours here, but the sun is still out. If that's okay with you, fellas, then go ahead and get out of here."

We thanked him and moved toward the door and then went down the stairs. The air kind of smelled a little funny, but it was nice to be able to breathe in some fresh air. We went directly under the stairs and

kind of stayed in the shadows, and we kept our heads down. At first, Sean hadn't joined us, but in about five minutes, he must have thought better of his predicament and came down the stairs and joined us. The only bad thing was that we couldn't smoke where we were standing due to the fact the plane was still being refueled, but it was still great to be outside and not stuffed in a tube barreling across the sky. It seemed that we were just outside for a minute or two, and then the MPs came and said it was time to get back in the plane.

Walking up the stairs to the plane, I had a horrible premonition about what was going to happen. None of us were coming out of this alive. Cold chills went up my spine, and when I got into my seat, I really started to think of the mission and how we could get out of there.

After the plane was air borne and we could move around, I went up front and said to Sean, "We need to work on an exit strategy. I need to know what the hell is going to happen once the assignment is completed and where do we go."

"It's been worked out, Jim, and when we get to Ubon, we will cover this completely," he said without looking at either one of us.

"Why can't we discuss it now?" Joe asked, dropping everything he was doing prior.

"Because I don't have all the details with me, and I don't want to make any mistakes telling you about it," Sean said, lying through his teeth.

"There is no exit strategy, is there, Sean?" I was looking right at him with my face about six inches away from his.

"Of course, there is," he said without hesitating.

"Then what is it? We need to know how we are getting out of there, and if we don't have an exit strategy, then we have to make one," I tried to sound as forceful as possible.

"After the mission is accomplished, we are to lie low until dark and then make our way to the American Embassy. They have helicopters coming in and out all day long, so we will hitch a ride on one of them

to a waiting ship out in the gulf. Now does this satisfy you?"

"Why didn't anyone say this before? Sounds good to me," I said, feeling very satisfied.

As the plane cut through the sky at 580 miles an hour, I felt that this would be the first time that I could lie down and get some sleep. I had almost four more hours in this tube, so I could lie down on the bunk and try to get some sleep. As I lay there, I started to think of the mission, and Diem's face kept showing up in my dreams. *Why does this man have to die? What has he really done wrong? If he isn't the choice of the people, then just replace him. Why assassinate him?* I'd never used that word before or even thought of it. That was what we would be doing, and that was what I would be called—an assassin.

When I was a kid, I remember playing a game where I played an assassin and I had to get the other kids one at a time. It was a fun game, but what we would do now was not a game anymore. I was going to be taking a life from out of the shadows. *Is he that bad?* I knew he'd killed or supposedly had killed thousands of Buddhists. But wouldn't you think the people would have risen up against him if this country of his is 90 percent, or something like that, Buddhists? I kept tossing and turning for most of the flight. That was when Joe came down and shook me.

"Jim, time to get up. You've been sleeping for over three hours, and we are about thirty minutes from Ubon. Do you want something to eat or drink?"

"I think I'll just have some coffee, but I can get it. Thanks for waking me up. I keep having a terrible dream," I said to my best friend.

"What's it all about?" Joe asked with concern.

"I'll tell you about it later. It's not anything terrible, but I need to work out some of my thoughts. Then we'll be good to go."

As we were coming in on our approach to landing, the plane started to really shake. Joe and Sean were up front, and I was sitting in my usual seat at the middle of the plane, thinking to myself that maybe I should have moved up front with them. The pilot came on

and said that turbulence was more than expected, but not to worry for we'd be on the ground in a few minutes. I'm really happy he said "on the ground" and not "in the ground."

The plane must have used the whole runway on landing, because after we turned around, it seemed to take forever to reach our deplaning destination. It was a huge hanger on the far west of the base, and it had guards all around about ten feet apart. Before we could deplane, they had to shut the hanger doors, which took about fifteen minutes. Once that was done, the rear door opened, and the stairs were brought to the opening. You could hear the noise of footsteps coming up the stairs, and there were a number of them.

"Attention on deck!" I yelled when a brigadier general in the Air Force came through the opening.

"At ease, gentlemen. We just have a few things to go over, then you can get off this bird and put your feet on the ground." And then a colonel, major, and two first lieutenants came aboard. With them in the rear were three civilians just standing in the background.

"The only main item we have, and this has to be enforced without question. You cannot leave your tent during the daytime. If you need to go to the bathroom, piss in a can. If you need to shit, hold it until dark. Gentlemen, you will only be here for a few days, so please make the best of it. If you have any questions at any time, these officers will be only too happy to answer them." He turned and walked through the door and down the stairs with all his officers who were like little children turning and following him. The only people left now were the three civilians.

Sean came passed me and went right up to the three and hugged each one. "How's it going, Psycho?" one asked him. They called him Psycho. That can't be good. Sean or Psycho turned and introduced us to the three. Each one nodded but didn't make any motion to come forward and shake our hands.

"You two got a great man with you in Psycho," Albert said. He

seemed to be the main spokesperson for the group. It wasn't said, but I assumed that these three had to be CIA. "Let's get you guys off this plane and set you up with a bunk. I imagine after that long ride from the states, ya'all must be really tired," he spoke with a heavy southern accent.

"Albert, where are you from?" I asked with curiosity.

"Dothan, Alabama, which is in the southeastern corner of the state about twenty miles from the Georgia State line and also eighteen miles north of the Florida panhandle. Beautiful little town and the pride of Alabama," he said with a lot of pride, and you could almost see his chest push out.

"Where you from, Jim?" he asked, but I had a feeling he already knew.

"Massachusetts. A little town in the south shore named Hingham."

"So you're a fucking Yankee." He laughed really hard.

"I really don't like the Yankees because I'm a diehard Red Sox fan," I said as a joke.

He kind of looked at me strangely, but you got the feeling he was thinking of what I just said. But before he could counter with a remark, the other two guys started to laugh.

"That's a good one, Jim. I'll have to remember that," he said with a sour look on his face. "Joe, where you from?"

"Cucamonga, California," Joe said sort of offhand.

"You a Mexican?" Albert asked with a straight face.

"No, sir. I'm 100 percent Italian. Folks are originally from New York City," he said. It was something I never knew.

"Oh, Mafia boy. Nice to meet you." He stuck out his hand, but Joe just looked at him.

"Now that we have insulted all our heritage, can we get down to business?" I said, trying to change the subject.

"Not right now, Jim. The big boss is due this evening, and then we'll

go over everything about 0200 in the morning. Y'all will be leaving here in about thirty-six hours, so I would suggest you get enough sleep that you can. This is going to be a long mission," Albert said with the other two nodding their heads.

"I see, and who's the boss?" I asked.

"You'll meet him when he arrives." The ten immediately turned and went out the door.

I turned to Sean and said, "I hate dealing with you, fucking people. Everything is a goddamn secret, and none of you can ever answer a fucking question. What's up with that?" I was really starting to get angry.

"It's just the way we were trained, just like you guys in the Corps. We are taught to try to answer a question with a question. What you have to do is try to ask a question that's not a question, and they can't answer with a question." He was really trying to be helpful, but even this was crazy.

"Now come on, Sean. How can you ask a question that's not in question form and expect an answer that's not a question?" To me, it didn't make a lot of sense.

"Before you talk to these guys tonight, think about what you want to know, then ask that not in question form but like a statement. I know it won't be easy, and when the commander gets here, he probably won't let them fuck with you. That's all they are doing. Some of these guys are a little upset that they are using the military instead of our own guys. The trouble with using us is that we can't shoot as well as you. To be honest, I can't remember the last time we had a mission that wasn't so screwed up that we'd have to do it all over again or just scrap, which we did a lot in the last ten years." Sean seemed to be apologizing for the way people were acting.

"You said the commander is going to be at the briefing?" I asked with curiosity. "If he's coming to Thailand, why didn't he fly with us?"

"You'd have to ask him that, but I know he's been back and forth with Langley over this mission. It seems if this doesn't go well and we

get blamed for this, South Vietnam could go to the North really quick. Langley is very nervous in what we are doing, and they have called him in two or three times daily. Not that I want to add any more pressure to you seeing this is your first time, but everything is riding on this.”

“I can feel the pressure, but if there is one thing I do very, very well, it is firing a rifle. And I truly believe that I’m the best there is at this. I am really at ease when I have that weapon in my hands, and I believe I have the best spotter in Joe Tomelli. With the two of us, we can’t miss. Pressure or no pressure, but one piece of advice. Keep those three assholes away from us. We don’t need them. Now they’re not coming with us, are they?” I was asking very nervously.

“No. They are here to get us ready and to make sure all the equipment is ready. Everything but your weapon.”

I finished speaking with Sean, and I then headed back to my tent. I looked around the base as dusk was setting in. Palm trees surrounded the outer reaches of the base. White sand surrounded the whole base where there wasn’t a tarred runway or taxiway. It was hot, but very little humidity, and we were just starting the summer here in Southeast Asia.

As I approached the tent, I could hear this awful noise coming from directly in front of me. I thought to myself, *What the hell is that?* As I entered the tent, I found out Joe was snoring and making such an awful racket that I was amazed that the whole base didn’t wake up or at least call out the guards to see if we were under attack. *How can I get to sleep with this noise coming out of him?*

“Joe, for christ’s sake, shut the hell up!” I yelled as loud as I could.

Half asleep, Joe opened his eyes and started cursing at me like a machine gun. The funny thing was I couldn’t understand a single word he said. He spent ten minutes telling me that he didn’t snore and that I did. Just as I was getting in my rack, he fell asleep again, and that awful noise started all over again. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep, so I got dressed again, put on my sidearm, and decided to go for a walk. I started at the hanger where we arrived and kept walking along

the edges of the buildings. There were guards all over the place, but nobody ever challenged or even acknowledged me in the hour I was walking. By the time I got back to the tent, it was 2200, and Joe was up and ready to go to the mess hall for some food.

"You hungry? I am starving. Sleep always makes me hungry," he said with a huge smile on his face.

"Honest to god, if you don't do something about your snoring, Diem isn't the only one who's going to get a bullet. Mother of god, you are loud. Stick a sock in your mouth or something, but believe me, that's the worst fucking noise you'd ever want to hear. I wish I had a tape recorder so you could hear yourself," I said in all honesty.

Joe always had the right things to say when he was stumped for an answer, and this was his best: "Bight me." Prolific as always, and it got right to the point of the matter. "Bight me."

"What a fucking scholar."

Joe went to the mess hall, and I lay down on top of my rack and fell asleep. I started dreaming about the mission and why we had to kill Diem. I had no idea what anything looked like, but in my dream, everything—and I mean everything—was white. No color. It was just white, but you could make out details of people around him. It seemed that in my dream, every time it came to me sighting in on Diem and getting ready to squeeze the trigger, it was—

"Get the fuck out of bed you lazy son of a bitch." And I knew that voice too well.

"Commander, what are you doing here?" That was the end of my dream.

"Couldn't let you go on your first mission without me here to wish you luck. How was the flight? Did you and Sean finally get along or at least talk?"

"Sean and I are fine. He's a really nice guy. The flight was really long, but the plane was terrific. Beats the shit out of a C-130. But really, what are you doing here?" I knew, but I wanted to see if he'd really tell

me the truth.

“Seems Langley is really nervous about this mission, and they suggested that I get on the fastest plane and get here and go over the particulars just one more time to make sure everyone is on the same page.”

“Oh.” I must be taking lessons from Joe on making a statement. “What kind of details do they think we are lacking, or what more can you tell us that we don’t really know?”

“Jim, you’ve got to understand that this is national security. If you or I mess this up, it’s not going to look good worldwide. There will be consequences that will cause a catastrophe that we as the United States may never be able to rebound from. This is why you two have to be perfect. One shot and it’s over. Then you have to get out of there as fast as you can. You can never be caught, and if you are, then you have to do what needs to be done.” And he left it right there and left the tent. As he was going through the flap, he turned his head and said, “See you at 0200 at the headquarters and don’t be late.” He then left.

“Joe, what does what needs to be done mean to you?” I was looking at Joe, but I was thinking of about a thousand things.

“The whole thing sounded like if we were surrounded and about to be captured, we are to kill ourselves. That’s what I got out of it.”

“Is he out of his fucking mind? I’m not killing myself for anyone. We’ll get out of there, but I don’t even want someone to suggest we kill ourselves. The spooks may be inclined to do that, but we’re Marines. We fight to the finish, and killing ourselves is definitely out of the question.”

“Well, don’t tell him that, or he’ll come with us just to make sure we do,” Joe said with a little smile on his face.

“The man is really intense.”

It was now midnight or 2400 or 0000 military time, and we still had two hours before our meeting would start. Both Joe and I were lying on our bunks and staring up at the top of the tent. Neither one of

us could sleep, and I knew that I was having questions going through my mind that I wanted to ask the commander or whomever was in the meeting that could or would answer them. Around 0100, I sat up at the edge of my bed, and I started talking to Joe, "Do you think we'll be coming back from this?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Of course, I think we'll come back. Why? Don't you?" He had that look on his face of unbelief.

"I don't know, Joe. I know we'll get the job done, but we don't know these other people who are going with us. You know what bothers me more than anything? Every time I asked anyone about an exit strategy, they hummed and hawed and never would give me a direct answer. Now after Sean gave me some dumb strategy about getting to the embassy, which anyone who I asked could have given me, it makes me stop and wonder if they are just going to leave us out there and let us fend for ourselves. I remember someone saying to me that the commander isn't your friend, and all he's interested in is the final results of any mission."

"Yes, but remember, he said today that we can't be caught under any circumstances. Now if that's the directive, then he'll make sure we can exit and make it back safe and sound." Joe seemed to have thought this out, and he was right.

"I know what you're saying, and that makes all the sense in the world, but why doesn't anyone tell us what's going on?" Frustration was setting in full time.

"Well, why don't we wait to see what's said at the meeting, and then we can determine what will need to be done to keep us alive? Remember, it's always been me and you." He stood up and shook my hand.

At 0150, we grabbed our gear, which was our side arms and canteens, and headed out to the operations building. It was the start of our first final briefing before the mission would start. As we walked to the meeting, neither one of us said anything. I guessed we both felt that what needed to be said was done in the tent. As we approached

the operations, there were two very large MPs at the door.

“Good morning, gentlemen. You can go right inside and take a seat up front on the right.”

As we entered the room, a big table was at the center with four chairs on either side and one directly at the middle. Behind the center chair was a portable peg board with a number of maps attached, and at every position on the table, there was a folder with a lot of papers in them. Standing against the wall were two men dressed in what you would say was native dress. One was very tall and muscular, and the other was about a foot shorter than his partner. However, he also was very muscular. These we came to find out were our Montagnard scouts. They introduced us to them and gave us their names, but it was too hard to say or even remember. So Joe and I came to call them Mutt and Jeff after the comic strip.

On the other side of the room was a staff sergeant from the ROK (Republic of Korea) Marines. He was a little taller than Jeff, and you could see on his face that he'd been around for quite a while and had seen a lot of action. His name was Staff Sergeant Seu. The three CIA civilians were also in the meeting, and they stood together with Sean. As we entered, no one moved except Sean who came over to us and shook our hands. Albert, with the other two, just stood where they were and stared almost right through us. As we were waiting for the commander and whomever he had with him, a Thai Air Force steward came in with coffee and rolls and set them at the middle of the big table. We were there for approximately ten minutes when the door opened, and the commander came in followed by a full-bird colonel of the Air Force. Both Joe and I snapped to attention, but we seemed to be the only ones.

“At ease, gentlemen. Let's get started with this because it may take us some time to get through all we have.”

The commander sat at the head of the table, but the colonel sat against the wall. Joe and I sat on the right side of the table right at the front. Sean sat across from me with the Korean right next to him. The

Montagnards were at the end of the table with the three CIA guys at the middle on both sides. We went over everything that we would have to know about the terrain that we would be going through. The commander explained what the Montagnards were there for and how they would be approximately two miles ahead of us at all times. The Korean would be our go-between with the Montagnards, and he spoke perfect Vietnamese and Degar—the Montagnard language.

Sean had spent over five years in Southeast Asia, mostly in South Vietnam and Cambodia, and knew the area like the back of his hand. We would not be carrying any food or water, so we would be living off the land. What kind of berries and fruits could we eat that weren't poisonous? Then we found out why the other three were here. Each one of them have lived in South Vietnam for over twenty years, and they were associates of the CIA. Albert was American, but the other two were Europeans—one being French and the other Belgium. They would be telling about the Viet Cong and how they behaved in the area we would be going through. Each one told the same story.

The Viet Cong were the civilian army in the south that were dedicated to Ho Chi Minh, who was considered the father of the Vietnamese revolution and the man who was responsible for the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. They said that the Vietnamese attacked the stronghold there and fought for fifty-seven days until the French surrendered, and Ho Chi Minh became a folk hero to the Vietnamese people. They also said how the Vietnamese would talk about him and call him "Papa Ho." They also described Ho as a fanatic whose life's long desire was to see all of Vietnam as one—no north or south, only Vietnam.

The main military general in the north is Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who also was instrumental in the defeat of the French. Why we were getting a history lesson was lost on me, but because I love history in any form, I was being entertained. I liked it. In the south, there were two generals in charge of their armies, Gen. Nguyen Viet Thanh and Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam. But the one they talked about for a long time

was the man who was the head of the “Young Turks,” as they called the up-and-coming politicians in the south, and that was Vietnamese Air Force general Nguyen Cao Ky.

They discussed the history of Vietnam for a while, and then we went down to the real important issues. We were to leave Ubon the day after tomorrow at 0300 by helicopter. They were to take us as far into Cambodia that they could and would drop us there. We would travel by night and sleep in the daytime. The only trouble with this plan was that daytime was extremely hot. Our plan was to travel from Siem Reap, a village up near the Thailand border some 200 miles to Pursat in the Cambodian highlands. From there, we would skirt the capital city of Phnom Penh another 116 miles and then another 70 miles to Prey Veng on the Vietnamese border. Now this is where we were told it was going to get hairy. From Prey Veng, we were to travel to Tan Chau, which was another 79 miles and then 116 more miles to our destination of the capital of South Vietnam, which is Saigon.

The distance was quite long with mountains and jungles to deal with. But the one major obstacle would be between Prey Veng and Tan Chau, and this would be the Mekong River, which is on the delta of Vietnam. This river, at some points, could be a half mile wide. Without a boat, we would have to swim across at night with all sorts of little and big critters in there. It was really something to look forward to and something you couldn't get out of your mind.

When we left the base, it would be October 1, and as the commander kept repeating, we needed to finish the mission no later than November 2. He never said why November 2, but he was emphatic that we should get it done by then. We discussed the terrain, which mostly was mountains and jungles, but what he was mostly concerned about was the chance we'd run into Viet Cong patrols.

We really didn't have any worries about running into any patrols in Cambodia, but he told us to stay clear of civilians because there were a lot of them who were in contact with the Viet Cong patrols

in the south. When we arrived in South Vietnam, we had to be on the lookout for patrols, not only the VC but also patrols from the Vietnamese army who were hunting the Viet Cong. If we did come in contact with either entity, we were not to engage them but to go around or go in retreat until we lost them. This was where the Montagnards would show their expertise in scouting and tracking. It was said that the Montagnards could smell a Viet Cong from two miles away.

As the meeting started to come to an end, the commander all of a sudden said, "There seems to be some concern with the plans for extraction. Isn't that right, corporal?" He was looking directly at me.

"I just would like to know if the plan is to get us out alive." I looked directly back at him.

"The plan has been always to get you out in one piece. Once the mission is completed, and you confirm Diem is dead. You are to make your way to the American Embassy, which is colored purple on your city map. I will be in the embassy, and I will make them aware that you're on the way. The most important item on the extraction is not to get captured or be seen entering the embassy. You will not enter at the main entrance but at an entrance in the rear of the compound. Once inside, there will be a Marine helicopter to pick six up and fly you to a ship out in the Gulf. Then from there, you'll be transferred back to the states. Are there any questions regarding the extraction? Remember, you are to memorize these maps, and you can do it all day tomorrow. Once these are committed to memory, they are to be destroyed. I can't say this enough times, but you are in a hostile environment. There are people in Thailand who have ties to not only the government of South Vietnam but also the people who have strong loyalties to the government of North Vietnam, and they will be everywhere from Cambodia all the way to Saigon. Is that understood, and are there any more questions?" Without looking around, he got out of his chair and left the room.

"I guess we don't have any questions. What time is it now? We've been at this a long time because the sun is starting to come up."

"It's 0545, and I'm hungry," Joe said as a matter-of-factly.

"Let's go get some breakfast then hit the hay for a while, and then let's work on memorizing the maps," I said, trying to pack up all the stuff we had in front of us.

Once we had everything, we all started to walk toward the mess hall. As we approached, again two MPs were standing in front of the door.

"No natives allowed in the mess hall," they said with assertion.

"They are with us, and where we go, they go," I said as we were going in.

"Not today, Corporal. As I said, no natives allowed." He was putting his full hand on my chest and was pushing me backward.

"If you don't want to lose that hand at the wrist, don't do that again. Now these gentlemen are not natives, but they are scouts hired by the US government. That means they are allowed in any government facility without question and that means this mess hall." Again, I went to open the door to the mess hall, and again, the MP put his hand on my chest.

This time, I grabbed his wrist and twisted it as I pushed down his elbow, bringing him to his knees. "I told you not to touch me. If you don't want both your arm and wrist to be broken, you'll let us pass, and I mean, all of us." I was now looking at the other MP who had this shocked look on his face, but he never went for his side arm. Then when I looked around, I saw that Joe already had his side arm out and was pointing it at the MP.

"You know you're in a lot of trouble," the MP who was on his knees said.

"I don't think you're in any position to say that. If you like, why not call the sergeant of the guard or even the officer of the day. I have no problem speaking with them, but we'll be inside waiting for them. Now, Sergeant, what's it going to be, letting us in or a broken wrist and elbow? Your call." I was still holding on to his arm and wrist.

"I'll make sure you do some time in the stockade for this, and I bet you'll lose a stripe for this." In his position, he was still very arrogant.

"Well, I wouldn't bet too much on that, but go get whomever, and I'll be right inside having breakfast." We went into the mess hall. And I mean, we all did and sat at a table away from the door, but we could see everything that was going on. A few of the men who were eating looked up as we came in and nodded as if they were giving us their approval on how this was handled.

We got our food and sat down and ate as slow as we could, thinking someone was coming for us, but no one showed up. As we put our trays away and started toward the door, I noticed the same MPs were on the other side. "Watch my back, Joe." And he nodded, knowing this could get ugly.

"Have a nice day, Corporal. Do come back, and see us soon," he said with a smile, but you never know.

"I will, and thanks for everything. You've got a great base here. Have a great day." I waved goodbye as I started back to our tent.

You couldn't believe that 0200 came very quickly when you just got to sleep at 2300. Sean was poking me and yelling at Joe to get up. It didn't take much for me to get up, but it took everything in the world to get Joe out of bed and functional. I had my feet on the floor by the time Sean moved over to attempt to get Joe awake. "We may have to put him on the chopper while he's still asleep," I said while laughing.

"Will he get up at all, or should I go get some cold water?" Sean looked at me with a twinkle in his Irish eyes.

"It will be the last thing you ever do on earth," Joe said without even opening his eyes.

By 0215, we were all up, dressed, and were putting our equipment on. We started out the door after checking over and under the bunks to make sure we left nothing important behind. We decided to stop at the mess hall to get some coffee. Like most mess halls in the field, they were closed from 2330 to 0430, but they would take a fifty-gallon drum, put water in it, and place it on an outside fire. Once the water

started to boil, the cooks would pour about five pounds of coffee in the water and take a big wooden spoon, which looked like a wooden paddle. They would stir the coffee for about ten minutes, and then they would just let it boil.

The key to getting good coffee from this contraption was to get there before the coffee went halfway down the barrel. After halfway, it became stronger and stronger, and when it was almost to the bottom, it was undrinkable. Luckily, we got there before anyone else, and we filled our canteens to the brim. From the mess hall, it was time to go to the flight deck where two helicopters were just sitting in place. Two guards were on duty, and they kept walking around the perimeter of the choppers even as we approached.

“Are both of these for us?” I asked with curiosity.

A Marine captain came out from one of the helicopters, and he heard my question. “Yes, sir. One will carry the package, and the other is an escort. I take it, you gentlemen, are the package?”

“I guess you could say that, but I’ve never been considered a package,” I said to possibly no one.

“My name is Capt. Eric Simon, and I will be piloting your helicopter this evening.” He stuck out his hand. We all shook it, but we never gave our names or rank.

At 0255, I could see the commander coming from his quarters, and he broke into a trot to make sure he got to us before we left. As he approached the first helicopter, he was really out of breath.

“You got to quit those cigarettes. You only jogged about one hundred yards, and you’re out of breath,” I said with as little compassion that I could muster.

“You know I could have stayed in my rack, but I thought I’d give you a hardy farewell. But now I have become acquainted with Dr. Coleman instead of Corporal Coleman, USMC. All kidding aside, I wish you God speed, a successful mission, and I’ll see you at the rendezvous on November 3.”

With that, the blades of both helicopters started to move and make a horrible noise. Within seconds, the blades were moving very fast, and the helicopters started to move as though we were driving, not flying. I asked the crew chief what kind of "bird" we were flying. I heard that expression at Pendleton.

"It's a Bell UH-1 helicopter. It goes 125 miles an hour and can climb two thousand feet per minute, and it flies right over the trees without any problem. You have Captain Simon as your pilot and Lt. Larry Holbrook as your copilot, and my name is Sgt. Tom Holdcroft from Lima, Ohio. We've been flying together now for about nine months and never had one mishap."

"Well, let's not have your first tonight," I said half-jokingly.

We taxied for about five minutes, and then all of a sudden, we were in the air. As I looked out the open door, the base was quickly disappearing in the rear. The night was perfect with no moon, and we couldn't see anything below. Sergeant Holdcroft had an M50 Ontos stationed at the opening, and he was harnessed into the mechanism on a halftrack curved on a stand that was attached to the bottom, and it swung effortlessly back and forth around the open doorway.

As we went further into the night, we slowly went down to treetop height, and we were moving quite fast. As we flew, Holdcroft took off his headset and handed it to me and pointed toward the pilot. I put it on, and I could hear the captain, saying, "It's that kind of night, so rather than put you on the border, we are going to fly in a few miles to make it a little easier on you guys. If you do have a problem with that, just press the little box the sergeant gave you, and I can hear you talk."

"You're the boss. If you feel that's safe, then it's okay with me. Remember, this is a very secretive mission, so we don't want to be seen by anyone," I said with authority.

"Understood, and I feel that no one is around where we'll let you out. So it's as safe as if you were in your mother's arms." He signed off, and I handed the headset back to the sergeant.

We were flying for about an hour when Holdcroft gave me his

headset again. "We are coming up to the landing zone. What I'll do is come in from the west and circle to see if we draw any fire. If we do, we'll have to go a little more east and try to find another landing area. Once we're on the ground, you'll have about ten seconds to get off the copter and away from the blades until I pull it up again. Then we're gone, and you're on your own. Any questions? Are you ready?" It was as much of a straightforward explanation that you'd want.

"We're ready to go." I signaled the rest of the team to get ready and move out fast.

As the helicopter came in and started to bank to the left, there were no rounds fired, so Captain Simon just kept banking until he came back to the original heading. You could feel him bringing the helicopter down for the landing. We were all on the edge of our seats as the Huey touched down, and Holdcroft started yelling, "Go, go, go! Stay down, stay down, stay down!"

I hit the ground right behind Tomelli. As was decided in our meeting, once we hit the deck, we would run straight for the wooded area. It was still pitch black, but you could make out the tree line, which was about fifty yards in front of us. All six of us were running, as if our life depended on this, and it really did. We made the tree line just as the UH-1 went out of sight.

"Well, guys, we're on our own." As I looked up and saw the two Montagnards heading off in the right direction and never looking back, I figured we would have at least two more hours of darkness to move out. Then we'd have to find a place to stay until dusk. Hopefully, Mutt and Jeff knew that, and they would find something for us. I turned to my Korean scout and asked, "Do they know what we need? A place to hide for the day. Will they be waiting somewhere for us? I figure about two hours to sunup. Do they know that?"

Staff Sergeant Seu looked at me for a few seconds and said very firmly, "Everyone here on this mission knows his job. The Montagnards have studied the terrain, and they know what we need. I have all the faith in the world in them. If you should have any questions regarding

them or even me, please ask me. Do not predetermine what the outcome will be or how they or I will act. Corporal, we will die to make this mission successful. Believe me on this." There was a slight air of arrogance in him.

"I understand, and I have all the faith in all of you. But they just took off, and I was just wondering if they knew—" He interrupted me in mid-sentence.

"If they know what they are doing? Of course, they do. Probably better than you do." And he turned and started in the same direction that Mutt and Jeff went about ten minutes earlier.

"You do have a way with words and how to make everyone feel welcome in our little picnic," Joe said, almost laughing.

"That really didn't go very well, did it? Now I've pissed the Korean off. He'll probably tell Mutt and Jeff that I'm the biggest asshole to come out of the United States, and these are the people you've put your whole life for. Oh, we are all screwed. Hopefully, I can fix this."

"I can hardly wait to see how you do that. Why don't you just tell them all that their mother eats shit? That should bring them over to our side again," he was just talking away.

"I am so glad you're having a great time. Maybe I'll put you in charge of the Vietnamese and Korean. Let's see if you handle them."

"Bet I could do a better job than you are doing." He turned and headed due east the direction we were to go.

We walked on a path for about two hours, and as we went around a bend in the path, Mutt and Jeff were standing at the middle of the path. They said something to Seu and pointed at the direction of a large clump of trees that looked like large Christmas trees about twenty feet tall. We were told to climb up about ten feet, and the branches were so close at height that they made for a nice bed.

As we climbed, I started thinking of our meeting the night we left and how the animals of Cambodia and Vietnam were explained to us. We were told that Cambodia has elephants, deer, wild oxen, and

parrots, which sounded very nice, but they also have in this delightful country panthers, bears, and tigers. We didn't want to forget that they also have lovely creatures, pythons, cobras, especially the lovely king cobra, and crocodiles along with every damn poisonous snakes in Southeast Asia. Seu said that the big cats can climb trees but usually don't, and the bears do but won't. He then said that the only animals we had to worry about were snakes, and there were a lot of them. Well, that was just fucking ducky. Now how the hell did he expect me to go to sleep when he just reminded us of what we discussed last night? I guess he did get even with me for running my mouth about Mutt and Jeff.

It was decided that Mutt and Jeff would stand watch one at a time. Mutt was going to have the first watch, and Jeff was going to sleep. Mutt decided to go up to the top of one of the trees so he could see for miles and make sure no unfriendlies would sneak up on us. They both did this every day we stopped to rest, and it was very comforting knowing they had our back. We did this same routine for the first week of our trip through Cambodia. We never saw any military or wild animals, and we lived off the land. We ate berries, bananas, and guavas, which Mutt would always have for us at the next resting spot. We had skirted the village of Siem Reap and were halfway to Pursat when the Montagnards came back to us in the middle of the night. It seemed that on the outskirts of Pursat was an army garrison with about seventy-five soldiers stationed there.

We were heading south mostly on this trip, but they suggested we go southwest for about ten miles to give the garrison a wide berth. They also said that this could cost us a day or two, but it would definitely keep us safe from being detected. I got together with Sean and Joe to talk it over, but it didn't seem like we had much of a choice. So, after about five minutes, we told Seu to tell them that their plan was solid, and we would now head southwest. This new course would take us just east of the village of Battambang, and then we would travel southeast to Pursat. We had figured that this whole trip was 667 miles total,

and we had thirty-two days to get to Saigon, which meant we would have to do at least twenty-one miles per night to be able to get there by November 2. It really didn't seem like that much, but we had to consider that we would have to change course if we ran into any more military, especially the Viet Cong. We also had the Mekong River coming up. How long would it take us to cross that mess?

After leaving the outskirts of Siem Reap, it was decided that we would follow the highways at night, keeping to the sides of the road and going into the bushes when a vehicle came upon us. This method was great on our legs because we didn't have to go up and down mountains in the dark and you could see the lights coming from about two miles away. As we approached Phnom Penh, it was October 19, and the traffic became a headache to us because we could no longer stay on the highway. But we had to find pathways to follow. Mutt and Jeff were terrific in this, and the paths that they found were quite accommodating to us because we didn't have to cut anything away, and that would not be good if someone were following us.

Within five miles of Phnom Penh, we decided to head deep into the jungle and give the city a very wide berth. It was going to take some of the time we had made up on the move, but we decided that for safety sake, we should do this. We headed due west for three miles and then turned due south for another ten miles and then back east until we came to Highway 1, which would take us to the Vietnamese border and the Mekong River. It was amazing that we had traveled this far and never came close to being discovered, but my feeling for glee was going to be suddenly interrupted.

As we approached the Moc Bai Border Crossing, we could see the intense buildup of military personnel on both sides of the border. Not only did the major highway run through Moc Bai, but the one thing we'd all been dreading since we started was the Mekong River.

Mutt and Jeff had us resting high above the border crossing on a hill about two miles away and which we could see approximately five miles in either direction. At the border, a makeshift bridge was

being used as Highway 1 ran from Cambodia into Vietnam and all the way to Saigon. As we sat there observing what was transpiring on the bridge, we could see trucks, cars, pedicabs, foot traffic, and bikes all coming from Cambodia and crossing over to Vietnam. Looking down at the river, the shortest point was right at the bridge, and we decided that was going to be the worst place to try to cross. There was barbed wire under the bridge that ran from the bottom of the structure to the ground and all the way into the river. Looking down past the bridge, the river suddenly widened, and it was kept that way until we couldn't see it anymore.

We held a little meeting and decided that Mutt and Jeff would go down the river until they could find a safe place for us to cross. We told them not to take a long time because we didn't have that much time left to get to Saigon. It was now October 25, and we had seven days a week to go forty more miles and be able to set up without rushing. This was going to be really easy, and then when we were finished, we would just jog down to the embassy and take the next helicopter out of this godforsaken place. I would never want to see it again. I knew at the back of my mind that this was just wishful thinking, but I didn't know which wish was going to go wrong, let alone all of them.

Mutt came back around 1600 and said that they had found a spot down the river that we could wade across. He said it was about four miles east, and then there was a road that we could follow back to Highway 1 and then on to Saigon. As dusk started to fall, we started to move out slowly, going down the hill onto flat ground. Just as we were coming down the hill, the sky opened up and rain like you'd never seen came pounding down on us.

It was dusk. Even when it was not raining, it was tough to see, but this torrential rain made it almost impossible. As we got to the flat ground, it had turned into mud, and we were slipping and sliding all over the place. Within thirty seconds, our clothes were completely soaked, but it was fortunate that before leaving the base camp in Ubon, I wrapped my rifle with a plastic sheet, and when I put it in the

haversack, I pointed everything especially the barrel down wood. It seemed to take forever to get to where Jeff was waiting for us. What was explained to us as wading out into the river to the other side was now the Mississippi River, but with a fast-moving current. It seemed almost impossible that we could get across at this place, but looking up and down as Mutt did there wasn't any other place as good. We huddled under a bamboo tree, with water falling off our covers and sucking the rest of us that wasn't dry.

The major concern with crossing here or anywhere in the river was how fast the current was moving and if we could keep our feet. It was going to be impossible to swim across in this current. We still had a lot of time left to get to Saigon, so the consensus was to wait out the storm, which wouldn't last that long. Then when the river subsided, we would cross right where we were waiting. We all said we could even wait a couple of days until the river was really low and we could walk across without really getting wet. We decided to camp out in the woods and wait out the rain, which we were going to find out really quick but never stopped. When dawn came, so did more rain. It seemed to be raining even harder than the day before. We looked out at the river, and it was wider than yesterday. The current seemed to be quicker. Again, we huddled to try to figure out what we were going to do. It was now October 26 and six days to complete the mission.

"Mutt went down the river about six miles, and when he came back, he said it's worse there than here," Staff Sergeant Seu was telling Sean. "With the current this quick, we won't be able to wade in without the current taking you down river, and you'll probably drown anyway." He really seemed so optimistic.

"If we can't wade out there, then it's for sure we can't swim it either," I said with a hint of knowledge.

"What do you think we should do? The only way across the river in this kind of weather is the bridge," Joe said like he really knew what he was talking about.

"The bridge is the only way, but we can't just walk across it without

being seen," I interjected.

"We can't use the bridge. There are too many people using it, and believe me, outside of Seu, none of us will pass for civilians, whether it be Cambodian or Vietnamese," Sean said with a smirk.

"I'm not saying will walk on the bridge. I'm saying we go under the bridge at night. We have six days to get to Saigon, and if this rain doesn't let up and we wait, we will miss the window, and the mission will be a bust. What we have to do is get the two Montagnards to scout the bridge and figure out how we can go across using the bottom of the bridge. There has to be a way."

"Jim, maybe you have something there. The water is almost up to the base of the bridge, and if we can crawl on the underside, there is a good chance we may make it," Sean said with a little glee.

"Well, it's the only option we have. We must be in Saigon on the second, so it's the bridge or nothing," I said with a little less authority than I had a few days ago.

When Mutt and Jeff came back, I told Seu what to say to them, and he sent them on their way to recon the bridge, especially the underbelly of the structure. The bridge was made out of wood that was set on pilings that were ten feet apart, one on each side and lashed down with rope and nails. The width of the bridge was about twelve feet, and the bridge came up in the middle. The approximate length of the bridge was about one hundred yards, but the river went under for about sixty yards the width of the river. When Mutt and Jeff returned, we all went into the woods for about two miles and then found an overhang on the side of a hill where we could keep partially dry and discuss what we would be doing. Seu translated what the other two were saying.

"The bridge is maybe ninety to one hundred meters with the river only going under by sixty meters. Now ninety to one hundred meters is a little over a hundred yards and sixty meters is sixty-four yards. They say that the bottom of the bridge is loaded with ropes, but there is a little crawl space right under the bridge on the right side going toward

Vietnam. The only problem with the crawl space is there are pieces of wood every 3.2 to 6.5 feet. Mostly the spread is 4.5 feet in an X form."

"Ask them if a man our size could fit through the Xs, and how many does he think there are?" I asked Seu.

Seu related what I had just asked him to say, and they came back with, "They think everyone can fit through the spaces, but it'll be tight. You may have to take off the haversack when crawling through. It's very noisy up there with all the water rushing underneath, so noise from us won't be a factor. But it's still good to be as quiet as we can."

"It looks like this is the only way to do this," Seu said to nobody but to everybody.

Sean looked at me and Joe and said to both of us, "What do you guys think? You're the two that have to get to Saigon."

"It sounds as if we don't have much of a choice. Seu, ask them when they think the best time for doing this?"

Seu again talked to them in their language, and he turned to me and said, "Right now. There's no need to wait."

"What do the rest of you think? I'm for it, but let's hear some objections if there are any."

"I think we should do it before we have a chance to change our minds," Sean said with his Irish wit.

"Okay, bye me," Joe was just a verbal machine gun.

"Okay, let's get started. Good luck to everyone. I suggest Jeff to go first to show us the way, then Joe, me, Sean, Seu, and Mutt taking up the rear to help anyone who may get stuck. Is that all right with everyone?"

There were no objections, and I would have been amazed if there were any. This group knew exactly what we had to do and what it was going to take to accomplish this mission. I didn't think they thought a little rain, a roaring river, and even the Vietnamese army were going to stop us, but they sure did try.

As we came down to the bridge, the night was as black as the

inside of a cow, so that was in our favor. We walked up to the edge of the river, still staying under the bridge. We looked up, and the crawl space was about ten feet above us. We did what we used to do when we were kids—ten fingers. This is where we lock our fingers and have the person put his foot in the cup of your hands, and as he pulls himself up, you pull your arms and hands up with his foot there. It gives him the extra boost to get up to ten feet.

When it was my turn, I took the haversack off and handed it to Sean, and then Seu and Mutt gave me ten fingers. I went up rather easily, latched my right foot around the bottom of the crawl space, and pulled myself up. With the width of the boards, you had to reach out to the next board and pull yourself over to it without falling down in the water. When I first heard what it was like, I thought we'd be able to be right behind each other, but in reality, we had to spread out at about ten feet apart. Everything was going great until Joe, who was halfway across and in the middle of the river, went to put his knee on a board, and it cracked. He was then hanging by his arms, with his waist and feet dangling over the water.

"Hang on, Joe. I'm right behind you. For christ's sake, don't let go."

Luckily, Jeff kept looking back to see if everything was going all right, and he saw Joe hanging there. He crawled back to the position right in front of Joe. "Joe, can you give Jeff your rifle so you'll have your arms free?"

Joe had put his rifle over his back so it would be easier to move under the bridge. He had both arms wrapped around the piece of wood that was holding him up. He tried to take the rifle off, but he was at a disadvantage with all his weight being toward the river. In the meantime, I had taken my haversack and my M-14 off and pushed them back to Sean. Keeping the piece of heavy wood on my stomach and Sean behind me holding my legs, I leaned down as far as I could and tried to grab Joe's leg. He was having trouble swinging them because he was afraid he'd swing too much and would topple over backward.

“Come on, Joe, swing at least one leg. I won’t let you fall. I’m almost touching your leg now!” I’m screaming so he could hear me over the river, not giving a thought if the Vietnamese could hear us.

I was about two feet away from his left leg when he really started to kick. I kept leaning further and further, hoping that Sean could hold me if my weight shifted and I would be hanging toward the water. Around the fifth or sixth try, I got a slight grip on his left pant leg, and I held on for dear life. As I pulled his left leg up, his right leg started to come up, and I grabbed the right leg and pulled up. I could feel my stomach slowly starting to go forward. Just as the wood passed by my belly button, I felt Sean grab both my legs, and he started pulling me back very slowly. As he pulled, I still could feel the top of my body slowly go down toward the river. I looked at the current, and it seemed to be faster than when we started. I held on to Joe’s legs, and Sean was holding mine.

Joe was starting to kick, and I screamed, “Stop kicking, or we both will go into the river!” I couldn’t see his face, but I could tell that he was almost exhausted. There’s something about near disaster that makes you reach deep down in your gut to accomplish something that is near impossible. As Sean was pulling me back toward him, I looked up and could see Jeff with Joe’s two hands in his, pulling him forward. I still held on to Joe’s feet as he slowly moved forward, and I slowly moved backward. Finally, Joe got enough of his stomach on the board that he could pull himself up, and it took me a little longer to be pulled backward by Sean. Finally, I had enough wood to pull myself up. Here, we all were lying on a 2×4’s at the middle of the bridge over the most powerful river in all of Vietnam. Sheer exhaustion had set in, and sweat was pouring down my face.

We started to move forward again, but this time, Jeff checked the wood slabs to see if they would hold all of us at one time or another. The pain in my legs was almost too much to bear. As I tried to pull myself up, I let go for an instant and found myself falling to the water. I held my breath and waited for the wet cold to cover me, but instead,

I felt this awful pain from a hard service. I had cleared the river by five feet, and when I fell, I landed in some bushes and rocks. I laid there for the longest time, hoping nothing was broken, but it seemed that everything ached. I felt around for any cuts, but I also was seeing deep down if I was in the water. This was just the first stage of death.

“Besides my whole body aching, I’m fine. A lot better than I’d be if I had fallen about fifteen yards back. Let’s get the hell out of here. Which way?” I was yelling at Mutt and Jeff, but they couldn’t understand a single word. Seu quickly translated, and off we went into the rice paddy that was beside the bridge on the Vietnamese side. We now had thirty-nine miles to go and only five days to do it, but I was now positive that we would be there in plenty of time to set up and get the job done as quickly as possible.

There was something I read about rice paddies that I really didn’t like, but I just couldn’t remember what it was. The paddies weren’t deep, but they were like mud. Also, there were walkways between the muck and the rice. We couldn’t afford to walk on the higher ground because there would be a chance we’d be seen even though it was as black as never before. The paddies gave us great camouflage, but after getting your boots wet with rain and now in the paddies, your feet felt as if it were holding a twenty-five-pound weight on each foot. I was thinking when we got to the outskirts of Saigon and the sun would come out, we would be able to dry our clothes. I just couldn’t get used to wearing these black pajamas, but I did get to keep my boots on. Once we came to the end of the rice paddies, we got up on the flat land and headed toward the woods once more. All of a sudden, Mutt and Jeff, who had stayed with us, signaled to get down and be quiet. I could hear some talking and noise coming from the wooded area that was right in front of us. We were hugging the ground when a foot came about three feet from where I was lying and just kept on going. As the group passed, I turned my head to see who they were. They were dressed like us, but on their heads were a very large circular hat that looked like a large pie plate. As they slowly went out of sight, we

headed for the same woods that they had just come out of.

"Who were they?" I asked Seu to ask the Montagnards.

"VC, number 10," they said in perfect English.

"I know what VC is, but what the hell is number 10?" I asked in amazement.

Sean interrupted Seu to explain what number 10 means. "To the Montagnards, there are two numbers worth knowing. Number 1 is the best. Americans are number 1, and the worst is number 10. VC or North Vietnamese soldiers are always number 10 to them. Watch and listen as they say number 10." They scrunch their faces and almost spit out the phrase, number 10. "Believe me you never want to be number 10 because I've seen what these people do to the Viet Cong, and it's not pretty. But in fairness, I've seen what the VC do to the Montagnards, and it's a lot worse. These people are animals with absolutely no feelings whatsoever."

We got into the woods and walked about another three hundred yards, and we finally sat down to rest. "Let's keep the noise to a mute level, never know who's in here with us," I said this basically because everyone was looking at me as if I had to say something.

It was decided that we would try to follow Highway 1 all the way to Saigon. Highway 1 is the most traveled road in Vietnam, and parts of it are famous or infamous, the way you want to look at it, like the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We weren't going to be on the highway, but we were going to try to follow it from the woods or rice paddies as far as it could take us. As we were walking on the side of the road, we heard shots in the distance, and we scattered into the paddies once again. As we stopped and were crunched down in the muck, Jeff came flying out of the woods, and he jumped headfirst into the paddy.

About ten minutes later, a group of fifteen men came out of the woods, dressed in all black similar to what we were wearing. Each one had a funny pie-shaped hat on, and each was carrying an AK-47 assault rifle. The AK-47 is gas-operated and semi-automatic, with a magazine that carries thirty rounds. The magazine has a pronounced curve that

allows them to feed ammunition smoothly into the chamber. They all had black on their faces, and you knew when you saw them that they were patrolling for the South Vietnamese.

As they approached the rice paddy, they all started to spread out. They were talking to each other, and they didn't sound happy. They walked up and down the outside of the paddy, looking directly in our direction. All I could think of was that one or more were going to jump into the paddy and start walking up and down until they found what they were looking for. Now we couldn't just stay where we were, waiting for them to discover us, so everyone had their rifles on semi-automatic and were all ready to take them out. What ran through my mind was what were we to do after we kill them all? But that choice never became a reality because the man who looked as if he was in charge yelled something, and they all turned, got up on the highway, and started to jog in the same direction that we wanted to go. We were going to follow them, or they were to follow us all the way to Saigon. I knew deep down that this was not going to end right.

As they disappeared, I turned to Seu and asked him some questions. "What were they talking about? Ask Jeff if he was the one they were shooting at and how that came to happen?"

Seu said something to Jeff, and he answered him. Then Seu turned to me and said, "He was going down this path about two or three miles into the woods, and he came upon them just sitting there, eating. He was moving so fast he was at the middle of them when he turned and started running as fast as he could. They fired a few rounds that sailed over his head, but he never stopped running until he jumped into the rice paddy. What they were talking about was about the same thing we're talking about now. They are trying to figure out who he was and if he was by himself or with someone. It seems they had to get somewhere in a hurry, and that's the reason they didn't come into the paddy to look for him. He is very lucky to be alive."

We got onto the highway and started walking west toward Saigon, but we didn't stay on the road too long. As lights started to approach

from behind us, we jumped off the road and into the bushes that were on the side. A number of military trucks, three to be accurate, passed us by, with soldiers at the back. Beside the trucks in the convoy, there was an armored personnel carrier and a howitzer. They weren't going very fast, just around thirty miles an hour, and they also were going the same direction as the Viet Cong were traveling.

"I can tell this is going to take us forever if we stay on this road. We got to find a better way," I said to Sean.

"I don't know if there is a better way. We only have about twenty-five miles to go, and we have five days. So it doesn't look that we should have that much trouble with all this time and not that far to go." As he was talking, a huge explosion went off in front of us, about three miles away.

"I bet that was the convoy, and the VC just blew it up," I said with authority.

We decided to travel in the woods and not on the highway, especially with what just happened. Within ten minutes, you could hear sirens coming up the highway from the border, and then there were trucks, jeeps, and ambulances, with sirens screaming in a straight line, hot-footing past us and on to where the explosion went off.

As we approached where all the vehicles had come to a halt, you could see the remains of the three trucks. They were still burning but all twisted and reeked with bodies all over the highway. From our position in the woods, we could see that the howitzer and the personnel carrier were missing. The army had cordoned off the area, and they were starting to spread out. So we agreed to move out not just into the woods, but we kept walking further toward Saigon.

The sun was just about to appear over the mountains when Mutt came back to the pact and told Seu that he had found a great place for us to rest in. It was now the twenty-eighth, and that meant only four more days. We figured we were only about fifteen miles from Saigon, and we decided that we would try to make the outskirts of Saigon the day after tomorrow. That would give us two days to reconnoiter the

city, the shooting zone, and the target. We would also be able to find a direct way to the embassy for our extraction, without us running here and there and not knowing where we were going.

I had found in the many times I had done this for the CIA that when you were early for the party, you seemed to make many more mistakes than if you were just on time. What I mean is that you make many more mistakes when you have all the time in the world. We arrived on the outskirts of Saigon at 0400 on October 31, which meant that we had two whole days to do nothing but look around and get the lay of the land. As we waited, some of our old friends appeared, and they seemed to want to join the party. The VC squad that we ran into back a few days ago and the ones who blew up the convoy were about three hundred yards to our left, and they seemed to be staying there for a while.

“What do you think they are doing here?” I asked Joe as I pointed them out to him.

“Beats the hell out of me, but I’ll guarantee you they are up to no good,” he said, just staring out at them.

“Well, we can’t get rid of them, and it doesn’t look as if they are going to move in the near future,” I replied. “I wonder what they are doing here. Is it some kind of holiday in Vietnam or a holy day for Buddhists?”

“Hopefully, they won’t get in our way, and maybe we can use them as the perpetrators to our mission. What I mean is we can blame them for what is going to happen,” Joe said.

“I think that’s already been decided who’s going to be blamed. I also think that everything is going to be in place for the second, and that’s why it had to be done then. I think we should keep one of the Montagnards and Seu here to keep an eye on them and let us know when and if they leave and in what direction they are going in. What do you think?” I asked Joe.

“You know this is the first time you’ve asked for my opinion on something, on anything,” he sounded hurt.

"I don't believe that, but this isn't the time to argue about little things. We can discuss it when we are on the ship waiting to get back to States. What do you say?" I asked with a smile.

"That sounds good to me, and I agree we leave the two of them to watch our little slant-eyed friends. We have to let them know how to catch up with us before we get to the embassy. Is there a code word or anything letting the guards to let us in?" He made a lot of sense with this statement.

"I really don't know, but what we will tell Seu if we aren't with him is to use the commander's full name and that he needs to see him right away, but hopefully, they'll catch up with us before then."

With Mutt standing guard, we all went to sleep or at least some of us tried to sleep. The next morning came really early, and Mutt and Jeff once again had fruit for our breakfast. As we were eating, we could see the Viet Cong just lying around, waiting for something, but no one could come up with a formidable answer. The one thing that kept digging at me was "Do they know we're here and what our mission is?"

Leaving Mutt and Seu to watch the VC, the rest of us headed toward the city. It was just getting dark, and this would give us the needed edge to get us through the streets and into position for tomorrow. Saigon was trying to be a modern Western-style city with brick buildings, but the tallest structure was just four stories tall. The tallest structure was the Catholic cathedral at the center of the city. It was very ornate, and it reminded me of the churches I'd seen in history books when I was in high school. Next to the church was a three-story building with a number of soldiers in front of it. This must be the government house that houses the president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem.

We were set up across the street on the roof of a restaurant and night club. It was quite noisy, and this gave us great cover to be able to move around on the roof and not be heard. The roof was flat and tarred with railings on all four sides that I would use to set my rifle on it so it wouldn't move and make the shot much easier. Joe would be right next to me with his scope to give me the distance, wind, and

any other pertinent information he thought I would need or what I would ask for. Sean and Jeff would be set up at the far end of the roof, watching the streets around the buildings to make sure we didn't have any unwanted visitors. There was a stairwell at the middle of the roof with a door that locked from the outside. This was how we came up, and this was the way we were going to leave.

Once I had the target in sight and everything was a go, Joe would give me the final numbers. I would aim at the head, follow the target for a short while to make sure he doesn't make any sudden moves, and then squeeze the trigger, and it would be over. Immediately, everyone would head for the stairwell with Jeff in front, Sean, Joe, and myself taking up the rear. As we descended the stairs, I would be breaking down my rifle and putting it back in the haversack. Once down on the street and with all the commotion going on, we should be able to slip out the same way we came in, down the many side streets and then out into the fields and jungle that surround the city. Once Seu and Mutt hear the commotion, they were to move to the designated position that we all agreed upon. If for some reason we were spotted and were taking fire, we would try not to engage, but if we had to, we were to take out as many combatants as we could to ensure our retreat.

The sun was starting to come up in the east, and Sean said it was 0530. This meant that we had two hours before Diem would come out of the government house and turn right to go to mass. If for some reason he decided not to go to church today, we had a contingency plan. Diem's office was on the far side of the building, and there was a building right next to it with a roof similar to the one we were on now. I would go to that roof and would have a shot that would be less than a hundred yards, which was almost a guarantee of success but also a sure guarantee of being caught or at least seen from that building.

It was now 0715, and I had fifteen minutes to decide whether this mission was a go or not. The commander told us back in Thailand that if I felt that this could not be a success and Diem couldn't be taken out, I and only me had the option to call it off. That was ten minutes before

he took me aside and told me that this mission couldn't fail and that I was to complete it by November 2 and have no excuses. So I had fifteen minutes to pretend that I had the final say, but the final say was given about a year ago in Langley, Maryland.

The sun was now up, and it was really getting hot on this roof. However, it gave me the perfect shooting field. The sun was behind me, so if anyone was looking up, they wouldn't see me due to their eyes being exposed to the sun. I had the rifle in position, and Joe was shooting me numbers. My heart was beating like a drum, and I could swear it could be heard all the way down the street. There were many people at the center, with cars, cabs, and pedicabs going around the big rotary in the middle of the square. It was now 0730, and the doors started to open at the government house.

The guards in plain clothes stepped out in the sun and squint and put their hands up to shade their faces from the sun. Right behind them was a man dressed in a white suit and with a big smile on his face. I would know his face anywhere because of the many hours I spent staring at his picture—it was Diem. He came down the six steps in front of his building and stopped and turned back to see who else was going to come with him this morning. A beautiful Vietnamese woman came through the door and down the steps. I assumed it was his wife. The cross hairs of the scope centered on to his skull, and I could felt my index finger starting to squeeze the trigger.

"175 yards to the target, wind out of the west about five knots. You're authorized to take the shot," he said in a very calm voice.

Suddenly, the rifle recoiled into my shoulder, and for a second, I thought of the first time I felt this at Parris Island.

"It's a hit, center of his forehead. Let's go." We all jumped up and started moving for the stairwell. I had trained to do this for the past six months, and it was like I had never done this before. Going down the stairs, I had trouble breaking down the stock from the barrel, and the trigger mechanism got stuck. I stopped on the second-floor landing and hit the barrel against the wall to dislodge it. It came lose, and I

almost dropped it down the stairs, but I grabbed the barrel just in time. We weren't running down the stairs, but we were taking the steps two at a time. We got to the first floor, and there was chaos everywhere. Sirens were going off, and ambulances were coming at the middle of the square. There were police cars, army trucks, and soldiers running around like chickens, and then we heard it. Bombs were going off at the center of the square, and rifle shots were coming in from the west. The soldiers in the square were firing back, but I didn't think they knew where to fire.

"What the hell is going on?" I yelled to Sean who was at the front door ready to go out in the street.

"If I didn't know any better, I would say it's the Viet Cong squad that we followed a few days ago."

"God bless them. This is the perfect cover. Is there anyone outside that we have to worry about?" I yelled at Sean.

"Can't see anyone, but stay close to the wall once we get outside. We'll turn left at the end of the street and then head toward the rendezvous spot to pick up Mutt and Seu. From there, we'll see what's happening in the city, and then we can have the Montagnards get us a clear shot to the embassy." With that said, he opened the door, and bullets came flying through the opening. He shut the door and yelled, "I don't think we can get out this way. Let's go back to the roof and see if we can get out from there." And we started back up the stairs. Just as we got to the top, the door opened, and two men in black pajamas stepped through the opening. Without hesitation, Joe and I fired, hitting both of them in the chest. The died where they fell.

"Who are they?" I asked Joe, but he just shrugged his shoulders.

"VC. The black pajamas give them away every time," Sean said.

Getting back on the roof, we could see a major fire fight going on between the soldiers in the square firing up at a building that was two kilometers away from where we were, but we could see about ten men on the corner overlooking the square firing down on the soldiers. It would have been really easy for us to have taken them out then and

there but then we would either have to continue the fight with the soldiers or give ourselves up and that we could never do.

The buildings were close enough together that we could make a running jump to the next one. We went to the far side, away from the fighting, and started running from building to building. After about clearing three buildings, we decided to try to go to the street again. Once down at the lobby of this office building, Sean looked out the big bay window and could see no one. He went to the door and looked out, and he then signaled to come along.

Once outside and Sean had gotten his bearings, we headed west down the street, hugging the walls where we could until we came to a main thoroughfare with cars and cabs going four ways to Sunday. Military trucks were in abundance, and they were all headed for the square. We slipped by a couple of policemen who were looking uncertain in what to do or where to go. They were screaming on their radios and were getting orders, and it was very loud.

Sean leaned over to me and said, "They just said on the radio that President Diem is dead. Killed by the VC. Congratulations."

I didn't even answer or acknowledge him. Two things were on my mind at this time. *How are we going to get out of here?* I just killed a man—a man whom I didn't know or wanted to know. I killed him right in front of his wife, and for all I know, his children were on the other side of that door. I killed a man because I was told too. I had no choice, I couldn't object. It was an order, and I had to obey it. No questions asked.

Right now, I was not really sure if I was made or able to do this anymore. But first things first, if we didn't get out of here within the next ten minutes, I wouldn't have to worry about killing someone else because we'd be dead or captured and then killed. We got to the outskirts of the city and headed straight for the woods, and after about two hundred yards, we came upon our other two companions. No hugs, no handshakes, but only a nod here and there. Off we went to find an easy way to the embassy. We found a hill to the west that

overlooked the city, and we set up there to wait out the chaos and see if Mutt and Jeff had found us an easy way to the embassy.

The afternoon passed in its heat. The sun went down, and it started to get colder when Mutt showed up out of nowhere. He started talking to Seu, who spoke to Sean, who signaled Joe and I to join them.

"Mutt left Jeff overlooking the embassy. We have one major problem, and it could be there for a while. The Vietnamese army has set up a ring around the American Embassy, and no one can go in or go out. It seems they feel that the VC shot and killed Diem, and this only means that a major attack on the city is eminent."

"How long does he think these things will last?" I asked Sean to ask Mutt.

"He says if nothing happens within the next two days, they probably will stand down, but there are no guarantees. Did the commander give you a time frame for when we were to be in the embassy?"

"No, he never said anything about that. It's just that we have to accomplish the mission by November 2. I thought that we'd be in the embassy by that night. No one expected the VC to show up and start a war in the square."

"Well, it looks as if we are going to be here for a while. Send Mutt back to Jeff and have them keep an eye out, and let us know immediately if the army stands down by the embassy. While they are there, have them figure out an easy way to get into the embassy without anyone seeing us. You know I never thought much about what we were wearing until the VC started to shoot up the place and when we killed the two on the stairwell and you said you knew they were VC because of what they were wearing. It's the exact same thing we are wearing. I'll have to ask the commander what the story is with this." And all Sean did was nod.

A week almost went by when Mutt came back and said that the army was about to leave the embassy and that we could go there probably later that evening. As the sun went down, we came down from our hiding place in the hill and started walking down the street

but up against the building. Joe was in front of me. He had his M-14 at the ready, and I had my .45 out and ready to shoot. We must have gone down twenty streets when we came around the corner, and a big white building was in front of us. A huge fence surrounded the whole compound, but the prettiest sight was the American flag flying on top of the building with a light shining on it.

“What’s the best way to get in? We just can’t go up to the front door and ask if the ambassador is in,” I said to Sean with a laugh. I have a tendency to laugh when I’m extremely nervous or scared out of my wits.

“I suggest I go around the side where the deliveries are made and see if I can get in there. If I have success, I will signal you to come ahead.” With that said, he was off and running toward the back of the building.

“What do we do if he doesn’t signal us to come ahead?” Joe asked with a sound of dread.

“He’ll signal. Why wouldn’t he?” I asked, but I really didn’t want an answer.

It seemed forever to wait for the signal, but nothing came. “Do you think we’ve been sold out?” I asked Joe again, but he didn’t answer or didn’t have an answer.

“What do we do know? He’s been in there long enough. Maybe we should have all gone with him.”

A US Army truck came out from the front of the building and went right and out of sight. We just sat there trying to think what to do when that same truck came up behind us. Sean was in the passenger seat and yelled, “We can’t wait forever, get in and duck down,”

We all jumped at the back of the truck and cowered down as the truck started up. Nobody said anything, and as I snuck a peek, we were going to the back entrance, which we went through with no problem. The truck stopped and started to back up into a garage. Once inside, Sean jumped out of the passenger side and yelled, “You guys can relax now. We are on American soil or at least that’s what they taught me

in spy school.”

We were escorted to the conference room and told to have a seat. While we were waiting, we started to wonder how Mutt and Jeff were going to get back to their village up in the highlands almost six hundred miles from here. I told Sean to make sure that they were taken care of, and as we were talking, the door swung open. Three men carrying large trays of food came into the room. They didn't say anything, except when they were leaving, they just said, "This stuff is for all of you. Help yourself. The ambassador will be in shortly." And they left.

The trays were filled with sandwiches, roast beef, chicken, peanut butter and jelly, pastries, and large pitchers of milk and coffee. We ate like we hadn't eaten in say a month, and it was delicious. As we were finishing, the doors opened again, and the commander entered the room. Both Joe and I jumped to attention, and Joe yelled, "Attention on deck!"

"You know you don't have to do that every time I enter the room," he said with an exaggerated, upset look on his face.

"It's the training, sir," Joe said with assurance that he was right.

"Okay, let's get down to business. Before we start the debriefing, I want to tell you that you all did a great job. Everyone in the media thinks that Diem was killed by a Viet Cong suicide squad. By the way, where the hell did they come from?"

We started at the debriefing from where we had entered Vietnam and went from there. We told him about the army trucks being blown up, and the two other vehicles being highjacked by the VC. We then told him about crossing the Mekong Delta and how much trouble the rain had become, how we had followed the VC into Saigon, how we found the building that we shot from, how much Mutt and Jeff had been such a help, and how we couldn't have done any of this without them and Staff Sergeant Seu and, of course, Sean.

While we were talking, I heard the door open, but I didn't look up to see who it was. We then told the commander that after the

confirmation that Diem was down, there was a VC squad coming up the stairs, and we had to neutralize them. We left two on the stairs and two in the first-floor hallway. We also told him how we had to go back to the roof and run across them to get to a building that had no guards or Viet Cong in it.

As we finished up and as the commander was finishing his questions, a strange voice was heard in the corner. "Who did the shooting?" It was the ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge.

"I did, sir. Corporal James Coleman, United States Marine Corps." I stood at attention.

"At ease, corporal. I just want to tell you that you did a major service to our country today, and because of you and your band of happy people, we may have stopped a war from breaking out here in Vietnam. Job well done, but it's too bad that no one will ever know what you people did here this past month. You did explain that to them, commander?" He was looking right at Commander Damon.

"They have been told, and they have signed the confidentiality letter. But I will remind them again."

But before he started, I interrupted him, "What's going to happen to Mutt and Jeff, commander?"

"Mutt and who?" the ambassador chimed in.

"The Montagnards, sir. How are they going to get back to the highlands where they are from? As I said before, without them, we couldn't have finished this job. It would have been impossible."

"A helicopter is waiting for them and your other Korean scout to take them back to where they came from. In fact, they can leave now if they want." The ambassador controlled the conference now.

I looked at the three of them, and they did look eager to get out of the embassy. "Seu, thanks for everything, and please tell your two pals how much they meant to this mission. Hopefully, we'll get to work together in the future," I said, not knowing that wish would come true

in about a year.

The three shook hands and left without saying a word. We then finished up the debriefing with a few not-so-important questions from the ambassador, and then he asked if there was anything we needed before turning in. Both Joe and I said the same thing at the same time: "A shower, sir."

"That's being prepared as we speak. Before that and sleep, I want to tell you that you three will be leaving here tomorrow evening around 2100 hours by helicopter and be flown to the USS Kitty Hawk. Aircraft carrier out in the South China Sea, where you'll take a flight to Japan and then on to the States. I want you three to relax, eat as much as you want, sleep as long as you can, and then be ready to get out of here as quiet as you came." With that, Ambassador Lodge said good evening and left us, and we never saw him again.

After we had finished with all the bullshit, Joe and I went to our rooms to try and get some sleep. I knew sleep would not come easy to me this evening because I had a lot on my mind, and I couldn't get one major picture out of my mind. Mrs. Diem was standing close to her husband when his head blew up, and I could see his blood on her face through my scope. When I asked the commander if Diem's children were also there to go to church, he misdirected the question so he wouldn't answer it and another question would be asked instead. He was an expert in doing these things.

As I lay on my bed, I could see Mrs. Diem with her mouth wide open and eyes bulging as blood splattered all over her face and clothing. Was I wrong to be concerned with what had happened? I know when I asked my father and the chaplain that they could see no problem in what I was about to do. Then why did it seem to bother me so? Would these feelings follow me through the Marine Corps? Would I have to do this despicable acts as a member of the Marines Corps and not because I was TDY to the CIA?

After a fitful night with almost no sleep, I decided to get up and go find some breakfast. There was a new set of utilities with a cover

on the chair along with boxer shorts, socks, toiletries, and wash cloth and towel. I decided I'd take another shower before going to breakfast, and I was in there for a very long time trying to get all the dirt off me along with anything else that was hanging on. The one thing I couldn't get really clean was my memory, and it kept coming back to me every five minutes. As Joe, who I had woken up prior to my shower, and I approached the dining room, I could see Sean and the commander in deep conversation. At times, it was extremely animated.

"Mind if we join you two, or are you trying to straighten out the world's problems right here today?" I asked, trying to sound as if I was in a good mood and nothing was bothering me.

As we sat down, a Vietnamese waiter or steward came to the table and asked what we would like for breakfast. I told him that I'd like some white toast with butter and coffee. Joe had a full-scale meal with eggs, bacon, flapjacks, potato, and everything else they had in the kitchen. I didn't know where he put everything he ate. He was only five feet nine and must only weigh 150 tops, but with what he ate every day, he should be well of 200 pounds.

"Commander, a question if you should know it? Do you know where Joe and my next duty station will be?" I thought it would be nice to know where we were going to be or even if we were going to be together.

"I know Joe is going to Pendleton and be part of the Second Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment, and you are going back to Washington and the Drum and Bugle Corps.

"That sounds great to me. I've been marching in drum corps for almost all my life, and when I was attached to headquarters before we started all this, I never really got to do anything with them. I'm really looking forward to it," I said with as much enthusiasm that I could muster.

"What do you think, Joe? Do you like the idea of being in California? Isn't that where you're from?" the commander was addressing Tomelli directly, which he never seemed to do before.

“Yes, sir. That’ll be great. I come from Cucamonga, and that’s only about fifty miles from Pendleton. But I do wish that Jim and I could have stayed together. Maybe someday down the road,” he answered with a sound of remorse.

As the food arrived, we all sat around and listened while the commander started to tell war stories. It seemed that he was a first lieutenant for some time, and he even thought of getting out of the Navy and going into private practice as a lawyer because that was what his degree was in. He went to Yale University to take law after he got out of Annapolis, where he was on the football team who never beat Army in his four years. He really didn’t say how or why he got tied up with the CIA. I discovered you should never ask because you wouldn’t get an answer, and he would always remember that you asked. The old adage was the answer: If I wanted you to know, I’d have told you.

We sat and told stories. Well, Sean and the commander told stories, and Joe and I just listened. I found out that Sean was never in the service, which really surprised me, but he’d been, as he always put it, with the company for over fifteen years. Now he had a very young face that really went along with his Irish background. Now I’m Irish, but everyone always thinks I’m a lot older than I really am. It seemed Sean was just coming up on forty, and I’d just celebrated my twenty-third birthday while we were in the jungles of Thailand. We must have sat in the dining room for a couple of hours, and then we moved to the conference room where the official threats were about to transpire.

“Ambassador Lodge touched on this last night, and I told him we went over this, but we hadn’t. I know you signed a letter stating that you should never disclose anything that went on this past month. Well, while you two were going through testing of your rifles, a top-secret clearance was being enacted in your behalf. The FBI went to your high school, grammar school, churches you’ve attended, and they also spoke with your neighbors and friends. This takes about a month to complete, and with that, you basically give your life to the CIA. It’s a little different this time because you’re not members of the

company. So you do come under the UCMJ—that's the Uniformed Code of Military Justice. Then you also come under the CIA protocol, which is also very strict. All this means that if you should break articles of the UCMJ or anything written that you signed for the company, you can be prosecuted and sent to prison or worse for treason. Is that understood?" The commander was now very serious.

"It's understood. We signed a bunch of things before we left California. I know we made out our wills, and I signed a confidentiality statement, which when I read it before signing though was very vague." I just had to get that in because the commander always thought his people were really on the ball. "Is there anyone that we could talk to, a civilian that wouldn't get us in a lot of trouble?"

"No one, and I mean, no one," the commander was now red in the face. "You can't speak with anyone. Is that understood? This is not a game, and these are very high stakes. If someone found out what we are doing it would be very bad for the country, and believe me, it would be worse for you."

"How long do we keep this secret?" I asked because I felt I needed to ask something.

"For the rest of your life or longer."

We were ready to go by 1700, but the sun had not gone down. So we waited. There wasn't much news about the assassination the day before other than everyone in the world blames the Viet Cong. Now Joe came to me early afternoon, and we started talking about the weird things that happened on the roof. He wanted to know why the VCs were there on that particular day and why they were at the same building we were. Did I think that someone had set us up to be taken out by them right after I made the short? I told him I had no idea and then asked him, "Why would they do that? It seems that we would be an asset to the government that they could use over and over."

Joe stated that they could get anyone that short exceptionally well to do what we did. He then asked if I really believed that we were the first ones whom they recruited from the Marines or any other service

to do what we just did. I told him he made some sense, but until I could prove anything or that someone told me differently, then I'd have to believe that the Marine Corps wouldn't put us on TDY (temporary duty) just to have us be killed when the mission was done. If they really wanted us killed, they would have had a unit better than the VC to take us out.

"No," I told Joe, "it doesn't make any sense, and I just can't or won't believe it until someone tells me differently."

At 2100 hours, the helicopter landed on the roof, and we were escorted to the landing zone. We said our goodbyes, and when the propellers stopped, we hopped aboard. As the last person entered the copter, the propellers started up again, and off we went.

Nothing was said from the time we left the embassy until we landed on the Kitty Hawk. The crew chief just told us to be ready for a hard hit, and then we were on the deck. As soon as we landed, a marine sergeant came up to the helicopter door and yelled for us to follow him. We went through a hatch on deck and then down three ladders that led us to the crew quarters. We walked down the hallway that seemed a couple of hundred yards and then went down another ladder and came to a hallway that had the globe and anchor and the insignia of the Marine Corps on the wall, so I assumed that we were in Marine country on the ship.

"I'm Sergeant Tisdale, and I'm going to be your liaison for the short time you'll be on the Hawk. You are not to go anywhere on this ship unless I'm with you. You are not to talk to anyone, and that means anyone unless I'm with you. You two are not to separate. If one needs to go to the head, then the other goes to the head but with me being there also. You will not be on the Kitty Hawk no longer than twenty-four hours, but it's imperative that you follow my instructions at all times. When we go to chow, it will be in the officer's mess, and we will eat at off hours so we'll be by ourselves. I don't know who you two are, and I don't want to know. But you must be special because I'm to be with you every minute that you remain here. Do you have any questions?"

We looked at each other, and I said, "No, I don't think so. Not right now. Oh, I forgot. There was a third gentleman that was with us. Is he also going to be down here?"

"Don't know anything about him. I did see him when you landed, but you two are the only ones I was told to take care of. I will try to find out about him, but there are 5,624 officers and enlisted men stationed on board the USS Kitty Hawk. So you see, I may not have a lot of time to find out anything before you leave us."

With that, he told us to rest and to try to get some sleep. There was to be a guard outside our berth at all times, and if we had to move somewhere, then they would come and get him. He also said that when he had any more information on our ride out of here, he'd let us know. With that, he said he'd see us soon, and then he turned left the room and closed the door behind him. As he was going, I could see an armed guard standing to the left of the hatch.

"Well, it looks as if we are stuck here until we leave," I said to Joe, who was lying down in his bunk.

"If we get to leave at all." Here we go with the conspiracy theories again.

"Come on, Joe. Let's stop that kind of talk. I don't like it, and this isn't the place for it. So stop, please," I was begging him.

"Oh, I forgot. If you don't like it, then I can't say anything. Who the fuck died and left your boss?" He sat up in the bunk.

"What the hell are you talking about? I've never said I was boss," I said, trying to deny his comment.

"Well, every time anything was discussed when we were in the jungle, it was always directed at you. For one, I'm senior to you in the Corps by four months. That should mean they talk to me, and I relay the orders."

"Is this what's bothering you, that they didn't stroke your ego enough and they talked to me? Maybe because I don't stand in the corner sulking because I'm the shooter and you're just the spotter.

Come on, Joe, grow up!" I yelled at him for the first time with real anger in my voice.

"You know, for two cents, I'd punch you right in your big short mouth." He stood up from the bunk.

"I'd sit right back down if you know what's good for you," I said, squeezing my hands together and getting in a fighters position.

"I don't want to fight because I'm sick of getting yelled at when things go wrong with you and I get blamed. Just leave me alone, and I hope after this, I never see you again," he sounded very serious.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you talking to me this way? I haven't done a thing to you, and it's not my fault that I'm a better shooter than you are. You know the lead shooter is the leader of the team. That's not my rule, but that's the way the commander put it, and that's the way it's done," I sounded apologetic.

"The commander. You're the only one he sees. If I didn't know better, I would say he's got a thing for you."

"You better take that back. You calling me a queer, I'll beat the shit out of you right here!" I yelled at him as I moved closer.

Joe jumped right at me, swinging his fist, and he hit me right in the jaw. It rocked me back a bit, but it was not enough to put me down. I came back with a straight right that knocked him back into his rack. I was on him as quick as I could, but all at once, two hands were on my shoulders. It was the guard who was outside the door. He pulled me off and threw me across the room. Joe came out of his rack, but the guard grabbed him by the waist and threw back on his rack and then stood at the middle of the room with both arms out at a 90-degree angle to his body.

"Stop this bullshit before I hurt someone!" he yelled.

I came straight up at Joe, but the guard's hand and arm held me back. Joe just lay in the bunk.

"Get up, you motherfucker, and I'll break your goddamn head!" I screamed at him.

“Fuck you. You couldn’t beat my sister if I even had a sister,” he said, still lying on the bed.

I was really steaming, and I was standing there against the guard’s hand trying to figure out how I could get to him and beat his ass. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I know they have a gym on this tub. And I’ll meet you there any time before we leave, if you got the guts.”

“My problem is playing second fiddle to you. I’ve been doing it since we were in Quantico,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean second fiddle? You are involved in everything I am.” I finally relaxed and backed away from the guard’s arm.

“We were the same when we were snapping in the new rifles. Both of us were shooters, and neither one was a spotter. I know you’re a better shooter than I am, but we were the same until I got hurt in Yuma. Then all of a sudden, I’m the spotter and no longer good enough to be a shooter.” He really sounded like his feelings were hurt.

“It’s not my fault that they did that. You’re the best spotter in the Corps, and I couldn’t have done what we did without you. You want to punch someone, punch the fucking commander,” I said with a smile.

Just as I said that, I heard a very familiar voice asking questions, “What’s going on here, Sergeant?” The commander stood in the doorway.

“Just letting off a little steam, sir. Nothing really important. It’s been a long day for these Marines, and they are not used to the closeness of the quarters. They are fine now.” And the guard who probably saved our bacon excused himself and went back out to the hallway.

“Now what’s Tomelli going to ask the fucking commander,” he said, looking right at me.

“Well, sir. I feel that the corporal here has been involved in all our training as a competent shooter. Once he got hurt in Yuma, you decided to change him to a spotter and not a shooter. He was just asking me my thoughts, and I told him to ask you.” I looked straight

into his eyes.

“What’s your problem, Tomelli? I want to hear it from you and not him,” he said with a bit of frustration in his voice.

“Well, sir. I would have liked to be considered the shooter on this past mission, but it seemed that it was already decided that Jim was the main shooter. When the particulars were discussed, it seemed you only spoke to him. And if I overheard you, that was for the better, but you never spoke directly to me,” he was almost crying with anger.

“So your feeling got hurt because you weren’t number 1. Well, fuck you, Tomelli. It’s my job to pick the best person that’s available, and for this mission, Coleman was, is, and probably always will be the better man. Now I know you’re a fantastic shooter, but you’re not as good as Jim, and I don’t think you ever will be. That doesn’t mean that you won’t get your own team in the future. But for this mission, I needed the best men, not man, and I chose you to be his spotter, which I consider a very important job. I didn’t know that I would have to worry about feelings and why someone wasn’t picked over the other. I’ll tell you this once and once only. You two are the best there is in what you do, and I’d use you again in the same manner. I wouldn’t give a shit if it hurt your feelings or not. Now is that understood, you fucking little baby?” And with that, Joe started to come out of the bed, but I jumped on him so he wouldn’t land in the brig.

“Let him go. I haven’t beaten the shit out of a little warp in a long time.” The commander was really mad.

“Sir, there is no need for this. We are just coming down from something we weren’t really ready for. You’d really be pissed at me if you heard what I said about you earlier,” I lied, but I was trying to get him to forget about Joe.

“I heard you say fucking commander. Was it worse than that?” He was not so mad now.

I didn’t answer but just smiled as I got off Joe and offered him my hand to pull him off the bed. He took it and shook it before he pulled himself up.

"I'm sorry, sir. Just a little tired and strung out from lack of sleep. Didn't mean anything, and I really look forward to working with you in the future, if you'll have me?" he asked, sticking his hand out to the commander.

The commander took his hand, shook it, and said, "I'd be honored to have you anytime. We will work together in the future, but you two may never work together again." And we both looked shocked, worried that we did something wrong. "No, you didn't do anything wrong, but you both should be leading your own team by the time we hook up again." And after he shook Joe's hand, he shook mine.

"Now let's go over the travel plans for tomorrow. You'll leave here on a small plane that will take you to Iwakuni, Japan, where you'll board a C-130 that will take you back to California. On the way back, you'll stop in Hawaii for a couple of days and then on to El Toro, California. In Hawaii, you'll have meetings with a naval psychiatrist, which is SOP (standard operating procedure) to go over any feelings you might have in regard to what you did. You're permitted to discuss anything with the doctor because it's confidential. Hopefully, you'll get some liberty, but that's still up in the air.

"Once you arrive in California, Joe, you'll go to Pendleton and report to operations and then get a week's leave so you can go home and visit your folks. Jim, you'll board another C-130 that will take you to Quantico, and then you'll go on to Washington, but you will not report to the Drum and Bugle Corps. When you arrive, you'll be transferred to the operation company in Quantico, and then they will decide what to do with you. Gentlemen, it was a real pleasure to work with you. And for your first time, you couldn't have done it any better, and I thank you for that. I'm sure we will be working together again. Just remember, no one is to know what we do or what we did. Thank you again. Now go to the gym and try working things out without killing each other." He let out the loudest laugh you ever heard.

"I'm fine, and hopefully, Joe is also," I said, looking at Joe, who was smiling and nodding his head yes.

The commander left, and Joe and I were alone in the room once again. "I'm sorry if I made you feel inferior, Joe. I never meant to do that. I needed you there at all times, and if I hadn't been able to shoot, I know I could have counted on you to get the job done. We were in this together. We're brothers and always will be."

"I'm really sorry, Jim. I don't know what got into me because I'm not the jealous type. And anyway, I can't tell anyone what we did, so who cares who got the shot? I am really sorry." And he came over to me and gave me a brotherly hug.

"I'm starving. I want to go get something to eat." I opened the door and asked the guard, "Is the mess open now?"

"The officer's mess is open twenty-four hours, and that's where you two will eat. Everything okay now?" he asked without smiling.

"We want to thank you, Sergeant, for sticking up for us. You didn't have to do that, but it's really appreciated."

"Semper Fi, Marines" was all he said, and he led us to the officer's mess.

The rest of the day went by without any problems. We never saw the commander again before we left. At 1330 hours, our guard knocked at our door and said it was time to go. We grabbed our gear or our weapons and followed him to the flight deck. A small two-engine plane was warming up on the deck, and as we approached, the sergeant said, "That's your ride, and one more thing." He pulled the both of us to him. "I don't know what you two did, but I know it was something special. And I want to thank you, and God speed. Semper Fi."

We jumped onto the plane and took our seats. We were sitting right behind the pilot, and he turned and told us, "We will be using the catapult to take off today. My suggestion is to buckle in real tight and put your heads as far back in the seat as you can. If you're not used to the takeoff, it may make you a little sick. After we're in the air, it will be about 1,001 miles to Manila to refuel then another 1,500 miles to Iwakuni. Weather is perfect, and this should be a really nice ride. But

it will be long and a little uncomfortable. We have some box lunches and snacks for you, so just yell when, you fellas, get hungry. You all set for takeoff?"

Without warning, he gunned the engines, and suddenly, we were shot straight down the flight deck. At the end of the ship, we dipped a little and then went right up in the air. My stomach felt like it had eaten a hundred hamburgers, and I hadn't taken a shit in two weeks. Boy, did my stomach hurt for a while? The trip to the Philippines was long and boring. The pilot tried to entertain us by going low over the water and showing us some whales and stuff, but it was so long. We landed at the main airport in Manila and went to the far end of the airport where there was a full truck there and two military police jeeps and a truck that had a dozen armed soldiers from the Philippine army.

When we stopped, the army guys jumped out of the truck and circled our plane with their rifles at the ready. It took twenty-five minutes to fill the plane with gas, and then we started up again and taxied to the runway. Just as we were starting to go down the runway and take off, the pilot yelled, "This will be a lot different takeoff than the last one." And he laughed like hell.

Again, the trip to Japan was even longer than the last, and you can just sleep so long in these seats. We would walk up and down the aisle to get exercise and try to forget the boredom. The only thing I was thinking about other than the trip from Japan to Hawaii was the one thing I've been thinking about since being in Saigon, the killing of President Diem.

Once we arrived in Hawaii, we felt like we had arrived in the real world. Upon touchdown at the Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, we were escorted off the plane and shown where our quarters would be for the next two days. We were shown around the base by a happy-go-lucky lance corporal who went by the nickname of Tiny and, of course, the reason was he was as big as a house. He said he was six feet four and weighed somewhere in the vicinity of 250 pounds, and believe me, that was a huge vicinity. He was three hundred if he

was an ounce. He was going to be our guide for the time we were on base. He said, "Everywhere you go, I go, except for the head and the showers. But I'll be right outside."

I asked, "Why all the secrecy?" just to see if he knew who we were.

He said all he knew was we two were top VIPs. "I am not to let you out of my sight, and you are not to talk to strangers."

I then asked if we would have liberty off base. He said he didn't think so, but he would ask the CO when he got a chance and then really laughed hard. I took that to mean no. After a quick shower and a change into a clean set of tropical uniforms, with no rank or insignias, Tiny took us to the officer's mess. We did explain to him that we were not officers, but he said it didn't matter because the CO said we'd eat there. "This is where you eat."

Tiny didn't eat with us, and it was probably a good thing because he would have emptied the kitchen. When we finished, we walked outside. Tiny was standing there, but something had been added to his uniform—a sidearm.

"What's with the weapon?" I pointed to the .45 caliber on his hip.

"Orders. I've been told that when you come out of the officer's mess, I am to be wearing my sidearm. I told you before, you two need high security. I don't know why, and I don't have to know, but I was ordered to protect you from any kind of harm. That's why your liberty will be contained only to the base. We have a first-class gym, movie theater, a great PX (you'll have credit there), and the most amazing library."

"Now do you think we want to spend our only two days in a tropical paradise in a library?" Joe asked with a smirk.

"Oh, do you guys surf? The beach here is amazing, and they have surfboards and sailboats," he said earnestly. "I'll have to check to make sure you can take out the sailboats and if I have to be on them also." He kind of hesitated with the last comment.

"Do you have a problem going on a sailboat? Are you too big?" I

asked, staring at him.

“No, not too big. Can’t swim or at least can’t swim out in the big surf. Sink like a rock,” he said, showing a little embarrassment.

“That’s all right. I remember going through Parris Island and how many of the guys in my platoon couldn’t swim or even float. So don’t worry about it. It’s not that you’re going to recon.” And we all had a good laugh with that.

We went down to the beach and went into the water. It was like swimming in your bathtub; it was so warm. I learned how to swim from my brother Bob when he took me to the local pond. There, you could walk out of the raft. On one side of the raft was really shallow, and on the other, it was twelve feet deep. We were standing on the raft, and he said to me, “Do you remember all the things I taught you about swimming?” He then threw me into the deep end and yelled to me, “Swim or drown. It’s up to you!” And that’s how I learned to swim.

We stayed on the beach for a couple of hours, and then we asked about the sailboats. Tiny said that it would be all right, but we had to stay in a certain area. We couldn’t go past the breakers. We all went and got this two-man sailboat, and as we were walking toward the water, Tiny said to us, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, guys. You’ll have a shadow out on the water. And if you get in trouble, just yell, and they’ll help you.” He walked away, laughing like he had told the greatest joke in the world.

As we put the boat in the water, and we were getting into it, Joe suddenly said to me, “Hey, look out there. That must be our shadow.”

And about two hundred yards out was a forty-footer coast guard boat just sitting there and waiting. There were two sailors on the front with binoculars, and as we put the sail up, a big black X was painted on the white linen.

I said to Joe, “I guess what we did or what we will do is a very serious thing to a lot of people, and they are getting everyone around us involved. I wonder what it’s going to be like when you go home to see your folks. It will be a while before I do. Did you happen to notice

when the commander was telling us a new duty station that he had you at Pendleton for a week and then you're on leave for two weeks? He has my orders changed from the drum corps in Washington to operations in Quantico and tells me I'll find out what I'm doing when I get there, but nothing about leave or liberty."

As we sailed toward the breakers, the coast guard boat started to move toward us, and all of sudden, we heard, "Far enough, time to turn around."

Our stay in Hawaii was very nice, and thank God nothing happened that would have been embarrassing to us or the Marine Corps. Finally, on the afternoon of the second day, our orders came in. Joe was to leave on a flight at 1700 directly to Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro, California, and I was to leave at 2200 on a flight to El Toro to refuel and then on to NAS Oceana in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The pilot said it would take about six hours, so I should make myself comfortable. Also, if I got hungry, they had those famous box lunches on board, and I was to help myself. Now I was not a stickler for security, or at least back then, I wasn't, but no one since we left Vietnam and landed in all these different air bases ever asked me what was in the haversack that I never let out of my sight.

After an overnight flight, we landed in Oceana without a hitch, and again, we taxied to the other side of the airport. A lieutenant commander came on board with two MPs, and he asked my name. I gave him my name, rank, and service number; and he asked if I would be so kind to accompany him down the stairs to a waiting car.

As we were going down the stairs, I could see the sun coming up. I imagined it was going to be a beautiful day, but little did I know, I wasn't going to enjoy it. As we approached the car, I noticed one MP had gone to the other side back door and the second MP stayed at this back door. He opened it, and the lieutenant commander said, "It won't be too long of a wait. Just relax, and you'll be on your way soon." He then saluted me and turned and walked away.

Strange that he would salute me for I had no rank at all on me. I

could have been a lowly private or a two-star general. I got in, and the MP slammed the door behind me. I was the only one in the car, which was a very large Lincoln with plenty of room at the back seat. I must have sat there for fifteen minutes when the opposite door opened, and lo and behold, the heart went in my throat. "Hey, Jim. How are you doing? Did you have a good flight? How was Hawaii?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked as the commander slid in beside me. "Hawaii was fine, but as you probably know, we couldn't do anything. We had a bodyguard all the time we moved around. And the Coast Guard, now that was a nice touch."

"Your orders are being changed. You will be TDY to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for at least the next six months. Again, this will be top secret so you will not be able to tell people what you are doing, but you can tell them where you are."

"What's in Cuba? Or am I not allowed to ask any questions either?" I was getting a little upset.

"All in due time, Jim. All in due time." And the car proceeded to pull out, but I couldn't see where we were going, because as usual, the windows were blackened.

We arrived at a very plain building in the middle of a number of other buildings, which all seemed to look the same. As we got out of the car, two MPs came out of the building and held the door open for both of us. As is with protocol, I let the commander go in first, and then I followed with the MPs following me. We walked down this long hallway with three doors on the left and the same on the right. At the second door, which was open, the commander entered with me right behind. The MPs closed the door and stood on the other side as guards in the hallway.

There was a very long table at the middle of the room with eight chairs, four on both sides. There also was a portable movie screen and a table in front of it with both a movie and slide projectors. Sitting at the table were two men dressed in black suits, both sitting at seats 2 on each side. Seat 4 on the right side was pointed too, and I sat there.

The commander was in seat 1 on the left side. No introductions were given to whom the black suits belonged too. Three pitchers of water were put on the table, with one right in front of me. Looking around, I noticed the windows were closed. They were blackened, but there were no shades. The lights in the room were fluorescent, and they were blinking, just like in the movies. Just as it looked like we were going to begin, the door opened and two more men in white suits walked in and took their seats on both sides of the table.

“Now we can begin,” the commander said, looking around the table.

“One minute please, *senor*. We are still waiting for one more person. She will be here in a few minutes. You know women, they always have to look their best no matter what time of day or night,” he said with a very heavy Spanish accent.

As we waited for “her,” I tried to figure out who these people were and why was there a woman with them. I came to the conclusion that the guys in black suits were in government, either FBI or CIA, and I was leaning toward the latter. The two gentlemen in white suits are Spanish, but where were they from? Puerto Rico, Venezuela, or maybe Cuba. But weren’t all Cubans communist? Well, I didn’t have that long to think because the door opened, and a very attractive woman in her late twenties or early thirties came in. She had jet black hair, fair complexion, about five feet three or four tall, and a very nice smile. “Now we may start,” the commander said as he looked around the table.

“Gentlemen and lady, my name is Commander Forrest Damon of the United States Navy, and I will also be the liaison between the United States government and the Cuban exiles living in the United States and Cuba. We will not be using your real names due to the high security and in the case this mission goes wrong and someone is captured and tortured. So please when you are speaking to us here, remember not to use your real names. Is that okay with everyone?” Everyone nodded their head in agreement except me because I thought it really didn’t

matter if I agreed or not because I was going to do what they wanted either way. "Very well! Let's get started."

"The two gentlemen here in black suits are with the CIA, and they represent the US government. The two gentlemen in white suits represent the Cuban exiles. The lady is our number 1 source for information within Cuba, and I will call her Mrs. Garcia. Does anyone have any questions?"

Mrs. Garcia shook her hand and asked, "And who is this young man sitting at the end of the table?" She had a very strong Spanish accent, but you could understand every word because she took her time saying the words.

"That is Corporal Coleman with the US Marine Corps, and he's the one who will be carrying out this mission. Any other questions?"

When no one said or gave any indication to have a question, the commander moved on. He turned on the slide projector, and the first slide appeared. It was a picture of Fidel Castro, the dictator of Cuba, as the commander explained. The next picture was of another rebel who looked familiar, but I couldn't remember his name until the commander said, "Che Guevara. He was military advisor to Castro during the revolution and then became head of the La Cabana Fortress prison where he executed over five hundred Cubans who didn't agree with Castro. He's now in the Congo, stirring up trouble, but we will deal with him at a later date. What we are doing here this evening is to discuss Fidel Castro and how we can eliminate him and put a person in charge who wants Cuba to be a democratic country. We will start with Mrs. Garcia, and she will give us an overview of Castro." The commander sat down in his seat.

"Gentlemen, I hope you don't mind that I do not stand for this presentation. It's been a long day, and my feet are tired." Everyone at the table laughed. "First, I will be calling President Castro Fidel, and I will be trying to explain him so you'll know what he was like when he was young and what he and Raul his brother have turned into. Fidel has two brothers, Ramon and Raul, and four sisters, Angelita, Emma,

Agustina, and Juanita. Fidel also has stepbrothers and sisters, five in total. All the siblings were active in the Cuban revolution, and Juanita was the one who would travel all over the world buying guns for the July 26 campaign against the then dictator Fulgencio Batista. He started out as a lawyer, but while attending the University of Havana, he got involved in the rebellions in Colombia and the Dominican Republic, and from there, he planned the overthrow of the military junta of President Baptista.

“After spending some time in prison, he went to Mexico, where he teamed with his brother Raul and a young man from Argentina named Che Guevara, and they formed the revolutionary group known as the July 26 movement. Upon returning to Cuba, he was very instrumental in the revolution that ousted Baptista in 1959. He imprisoned and murdered anyone who disagreed with his belief in socialism and his strong friendship with the Soviet Union. In 1961, Fidel officially proclaimed Cuba to be a one-party state under the Communist Party rule. Fidel then became—are you ready for this title?—first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba. Wow, that’s a mouthful.” Everyone at the table had a great big laugh over that comment.

“Continuing. He was known as an expert in guerrilla warfare, and believe me, gentlemen, that is how he won the revolution. Fidel is not ignorant, and he’s definitely not stupid. He’s been led down the wrong path, and he really enjoys the power that being a dictator brings. In 1960, with the bombing of French vessel—the *Le Coubre*—in Havana harbor, Fidel was convinced that the United States had a very strong hand in this. The ship’s cargo was weapons purchased from Belgium, and the ship sunk in the harbor and the cargo was lost forever.

“Fidel is paranoid about the United States and those trying to assassinate him or the US will send the Marines to our country. Thus, he’s increased the size of the Cuban army to 130,000—both officers and enlisted. He not only has an army but also has a navy and an air force. He only has four planes, but to him, it’s an air force. I don’t believe he

has any battleships or destroyers, but he's got boats, and that's how he conquered Santiago with a luxury boat that his father-in-law gave him. He carried over 1,200 revolutionaries to take Santiago, which he did. A week after the Batista regime fell to the revolutionaries, Fidel entered Havana as the conquering hero."

This went on for another half hour, telling all of us how great Castro was and how he helped the little people who were used by the terrible dictator Batista and how Castro freed the working people from the shackles of capitalism and showed Cubans how great he was and how great Communism would be for their island and how the United States wasn't going to take advantage of Cuba as it has in other parts of the world. I listened to this dribble for just so long, and then I started to think of other things. One was if Mrs. Garcia was telling everyone at the table how great Fidel was, why were we meeting to plan on killing him. Another item I started to think of and one that I'd thought of many times since Vietnam was how easy it was for the United States government to kill anyone in the world that they didn't like.

I kept thinking and seeing Diem in my sleep and the look on his wife's face as his head exploded in front of her. What did they tell her? Now they let her live and her children, and they were permitted to leave South Vietnam and take up residence in France as political refugees. Every once in a while, I would tune back to see if Mrs. Garcia had finished speaking, but she hadn't, so I again went off in my little world to think about things that I probably shouldn't have or things that I should take to a psychiatrist about, which I would never.

I went to turn back in to see what Mrs. Garcia was saying when I heard the commander say, "Are there any questions for Mrs. Garcia regarding Fidel Castro?"

I knew I shouldn't be asking questions, but I just had to. "Mrs. Garcia, your remembrance of President Castro is remarkable, and I'm not going to ask how you know all this, but my question is to you, madam. After listening to everything you said about Castro."

"Fidel," she said emphatically, interrupting my train of thought.

"As I was saying, all you said about Castro was terrific. Then why in the world do you want him dead?" I was looking directly into her cold, black eyes.

I believed I caught her by surprise with my question, but before she could collect herself, one of the men in white suits interrupted with his answer: "Gentlemen, you may call me Juan, and I can answer the corporal's question for him. Fidel Castro freed the country of Cuba from a despicable tyrant but gave us probably something worse, Communism. We as Cubans are not free, but we come under the yoke of the Soviet Union, and Castro is just a puppet under their regime. Most people do not know this, and a lot of the older people just remember Baptista and how hard it was living under him. Now Castro is trying to get the peasants to side with him, and he's capturing and executing all opposition to him. That's why everyday, someone tries to sail from Cuba to the United States on anything that floats. Castro is ruining our country, and he must be stopped. There are no elections per say in our country because he's the only one that is allowed to run in a one-party election. If you speak out and you're in Cuba, sooner or later you will be captured and killed. He must be eliminated, and a person with ties to the United States and democracy must be elected in his place. That's why he should be assassinated."

There was that word again. I was really getting to hate it. "I see and thank you for explaining that to me."

The commander was looking daggers at me, but he didn't say anything or at least not at the table. "All right. Let's get started. It is now November 21. Tomorrow, Corporal Coleman will leave for Guantanamo Bay, and this mission will be put into operation. This right now looks as if it will be a six-month time frame. Coleman will be going through some heavy training with the Reconnaissance Marines stationed on the island. After his training is complete and I feel he is ready to continue, he will be pulled out of his present assignment with Recon, and this mission will proceed without fail. Once this mission

is in its last stages, no one, except the president of the United States, can cancel it. Are there any other main issues that we should know?"

Mrs. Garcia cleared her voice and said, "Look-alikes. Fidel has a number of people who look exactly like him. He's even had them go through plastic surgery so they would not be any doubt. He is extremely paranoid, and he has at least six look-alikes in the palace at all times. Some are remarkable that I don't even know the difference from a distance. The only way you can really tell is that Fidel can make a speech that will last at least two hours and the look-alikes, don't."

"Then how will we know who is who?" I asked with a sense of urgency.

"That's what Juan and his friend here are going to help us with. They still live in Havana, and they will be in constant contact with Sean."

The following day, my seabag had finally arrived with my uniforms in it, and I rushed over to the base cleaners to see if they could iron out my tropical uniform to wear to Cuba. After coming back with two sets of tropical in mint condition, I started to walk toward the airfield. At about 1300 hours, the commander met me at the tarmac and handed me my TDY orders and wished me well and said that he'd see me in about four months. He told me that Sean would also be joining us in about five months. "But he'll be in Cuba next month, watching everything Castro does, and he'll have it all mapped out for you when we all join up." He was kidding me about the Recon training and finalizing our discussion when the sirens started to go off. The pilot came off the C-130 and headed toward us.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?" the commander said to the pilot.

"Don't know, commander, but we just got a radio message from the tower ordering us to shut down the aircraft. They also said no flights would be going to Gitmo today or, in fact, anywhere else. It must be something serious."

Just then, a mechanic in a jeep came by, slammed on his breaks, and yelled, "Kennedy has just been shot in Dallas. The base is going

on high security.”

“Is he dead?” the commander yelled, but the mechanic was already on his way across the tarmac.

“What do you think this means?” I asked the commander, but as I asked the question, I thought it was stupid.

“What does what mean? That’s a very vague question, Jim. It means the president has been shot, and it means we will go on high security around the world. The main question, is he alive or dead?”

We started to walk toward the tower when a four-by-four truck came screaming around the corner of the tower and slammed on the breaks. As it came to a stop, about twenty Marines came piling out of the back. They were fully armed and started to take up stations around the tower. The commander and I walked through the Marines and into the waiting area of the tower building. The commander told me to wait there, and he went through a door and disappeared. I had my orders in my hand, so I was concerned that I would be in trouble, but if no flights were not going out to Guantanamo Bay today, where would I be staying the night? I noticed there was a big, long couch against the wall, and I walked over to it and put my seabag on it. I was sitting there for about an hour when the commander came through the door, and he didn’t look too good.

“He’s dead,” he said to me without saying anything else.

“What do you mean he’s dead?” I asked again, knowing as I said it that it was a stupid comeback. “I mean, who shot him and why?”

“All I know is he’s dead, and Lyndon Johnson is now the president of the United States.” He was almost crying. “I’m going back up to Langley to see what the hell is going on. Give me your orders, and I’ll handwrite you new ones to headquarters, and you stay there until I get in touch with you. Come on. I’ll give you a lift to Washington.”

We both walked to the car, and we drove the four hours from Oceana to Washington in total silence except the radio was blasting about the assassination and who did it and why they did it and who was behind it. Of course, this was all conjecture, but it was amazing

how much of this talk came true in the end or at least the CIA thought it to be true.

When I arrived at the headquarters, the commander came in with me, and he went into the commanding general's office and was in there for about thirty minutes. When he came out, he told me everything was arranged, and that I was to stay here until he contacted me. He said that I would be assigned to operations, and then he left. A lance corporal came by and said that I was to follow him, and he showed me where I was to bunk. We entered a very large squad bay, and he pointed out a bunk at the corner and asked if that was all right. He said, "Usually, an NCO gets his own room, but there are none available at this time. When one becomes available, I'll make sure you get it."

I put my seabag on the rack and then went to find linens and a blanket. I ran into a corporal whom I knew when I was here last time, and he showed me where to pick up some stuff. Then he told me we were on lockdown because of the death of the president. That night, we all sat in the TV room and watched Walter Cronkite talk about what had happened in Dallas, Texas.

The next morning, all New England marines were summoned to the TV room by order of the commandant of the Marine Corps. As we were all milling around and trying to figure out what was going on, the TV room door flew open, and a captain stood in the doorway and yelled, "Attention on deck." With that, he stepped aside and entered a four-star general who was the twenty-second commandant of the Marine Corps, David M. Shoup. The "boss" was going to address us here in the TV room, only in the Marine Corps.

"Gentlemen, at ease. This is a very dark day for the United States with the passing of our beloved president John F. Kennedy from Massachusetts. The reason you have been ordered here is that you have been selected to participate in the funeral parade two days from now. Captain Rosemond will explain what this entails and what your particular job will be. As commandant and head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there have been a number of possibilities that have come over my

desk, but I want to tell you, gentlemen, that the only thing that should be in your mind today and for the next few days is the president's funeral and how you will represent the Marine Corps. I will now leave you to the instructions of Captain Rosemond, and I want to thank you for your representation." He immediately turned and left the room with about six junior officers chasing after him.

Captain Rosemond stepped to the microphone and started to explain, "You Marines have been chosen to march in the state funeral because you all are from Massachusetts, and the commandant thought that this would be special for the Corps having all Massachusetts marines in the Honor Guard. Now there are only fourteen of you here, but another fourteen will be coming in during the day from all over the east coast. Now there are a few of you that will have special duties, and you will be called into my office individually. If no one has any questions, you are dismissed, but do not try to leave the base because we are still on lockdown and will be until after the funeral." As the commandant did, so did the captain, he turned and left the room immediately.

A lieutenant came to the podium and yelled, "Attention on deck. The following will report to Captain Rosemond's office immediately." He started reading some names, which I didn't pay particular attention too until I heard, "Corporal James Coleman." That got my attention immediately. Now I had to find the captain's office without causing any undue questions. I started to walk out of the TV room, I turned left, and I saw about four people standing in front of this office that had a sign on the door, saying, "Captain James Rosemond, Operations."

That wasn't very hard, and I walked up and stood behind the last man in line. Just as we were about to talk to each other, the captain's door opened, and a master sergeant came to the opening and yelled, "Coleman, center yourself at the doorway." That was the way we were told when we go to the drill instructor's office in Parris Island.

"Corporal James Coleman reporting as ordered, sir." I stood at the doorway.

“Come in, Corporal. Shut the door and stand at ease,” he said with a somber look.

“Corporal, is it a fact that you come from Hingham, Massachusetts?” He pronounced Massachusetts the way most people do who don’t come from there. It was messed up.

“Yes, sir. Born and raised,” I answered with a smile.

“Well, you’ve been chosen to represent your fair city in the horrible event, but there are a few other items we need to go over and that you need to know. When you are marching, you will be in the first squad at the right end, and you will be carrying an M-14 rifle with magazine and fixed bayonets. Your rifle will be loaded, and you will have in your dress belt two loaded magazines along with the loaded magazine that you have in your rifle. At the burial site in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, you will be assigned to protect two of the dignitaries who will be in attendance, but they will not know anything about this. Your assignment will be General Charles De Gaulle, president of France, and Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia, who will be standing side by side. The only difficulty will be that De Gaulle is six feet five tall, and Selassie is only five feet four small.

“Now you see your difficulty. How to keep either one safe? If this is a plot against the world’s leaders, then they will have most of them in one place. You are to do everything in your power to keep these men safe. Fortunately, they are alone and won’t be bringing their spouses as some will. You are not to leave ranks, but if anything should happen, then you’ll move toward your protectorates and make sure they are safe until their own protection squad arrives. Are there any questions?” He was looking right at me.

“Sir, if by chance there is some kind of shooting, am I to return fire or just secure my protectorates?”

“I am well aware of your background and your ability to fire your weapon, Corporal. If you see who’s firing, take the motherfuckers out, and that’s an order.” He shook my hand and then dismissed me.

As I was leaving the office, the master sergeant said to me,

“Someone will be in touch within the hour.”

As is the way of the Marine Corps, an hour became half the day. I just sat on my bunk with my shoes on and with my cleaning material in front of me. I picked up my left shoe and started to apply polish to it when a civilian came and sat on my bunk.

“Are you Coleman?” He looked down as he spoke.

“And you are?” I asked back.

“Don’t worry who I am. Just answer the fucking question. Are you Coleman?” he snarled as he talked.

“One thing before we start. Get the fuck off my rack, and you better put a fucking corporal in front of the name. And again now, who the fuck are you?” I asked as I was getting up and standing over him.

“Relax, Corporal. My name is Griffin, and I’m with the FBI. I don’t like this anymore than you will, but I have to ask you a bunch of jackass questions before you’ll be allowed to participate in the funeral parade. Is it all right that I ask you a few things?” He calmed down about 500 percent.

“Yes, sir, no problem.” I didn’t apologize for my response.

“Are you or have you ever been a member of the communist party?” he asked, almost laughing.

“Now, Mr. Griffin. If I were you, do you really think I’d admit it, especially here?” I said very earnestly.

“I know this is ridiculous, Corporal, but just try to answer yes or no without any added explanation,” he said, not sounding mad but a little put out.

“Yes, sir. Sorry about that. No, I have never been a member.”

Now he must have asked me fifty different questions. If I was a member in any off-the-wall anti-American groups, what my mother and father did, what my brother’s affiliations with any parties, who I had dated in the past five years, what her mother and father did, what I wanted to do when I left the Corps, or if I was going to be a lifer—all sorts of dumb questions with a few really good questions

intermingled with the bad. It took about forty-five minutes to finish, and in the meantime, I noticed that there were also civilians talking to the other guys on the other bunks. When he finished, Mr. FBI told me not to discuss with the other Marines what we talked about, and then he left. Telling a Marine not to discuss something without saying that you'd be shot if you did, then it was fair game to talk to anyone about everything, which we did for the rest of the day with a huge laugh.

As Monday, November 25, quickly approached, I was getting a little nervous. No one knew what was happening and why the president was killed. Conjecture ran rampant. Some people thought it was a communist plot to get all the world's leaders in one place and then kill them all and take over the world. Others just thought that the president just pissed off a lot of people in this country, and they hired someone to assassinate him. Then there were others who thought Castro and the Cubans had a lot to do with his killing, but in the end or at least at the funeral, my main objective was to keep two people safe and sound and to make sure they didn't get killed. As I was lying on my bunk, a lance corporal came by with a big and heavy box. In the box was a clipboard and a number of M14 magazines.

"Are you Corporal Coleman?" he asked, putting the box on my bed. "Do you mind?" He saw that I made a face.

"Not at all. What's you got?" I asked, trying to be as friendly as I could.

"I have three magazines for you—one for the rifle and two to carry on your belt. Is that correct in what you've been told before?" he inquired, not sounding too sure.

"That's what I was told, so I guess it's fact," I said, taking the three magazines from him and signing the paper that was attached to the clipboard.

"Thanks, Corporal, and good luck." He left as quickly as he came.

I had just finished cleaning my rifle, and I debated whether to put the magazine in the rifle. Then I thought this would be a loaded weapon, and God knows what would happen until tomorrow at 10:00

a.m. I then put all three magazines under my mattress toward the right of my head.

The following morning, we all were awakened at 0500 and told that the chow hall was open, and it was advised that we all have a big breakfast because it was going to be a long day and no chow would be available. I walked over to the mess hall with a couple of guys that it turned out were from towns right around mine, and they were of the same age as me. We had breakfast, but I didn't eat heavy. I just had a couple of cups of coffee and some toast, and I was good to go for the day. As we walked back, no one spoke, but we all knew what was going on.

The day was brisk and clear, and we were all dressed in our dress blues, which, in my opinion, is the prettiest of all the dress uniforms in any of our armed services. With our uniform, we were issued a white web belt that would hold the additional magazines to the M14. We were bused to the back of the capital building where his body had been lying in state till midnight on Sunday. We formed up and proceeded to march to the front of the capital and waited for the rest of the procession.

As we were standing at ease, the same master sergeant who was in the captain's office came by and asked, "Is your rifle loaded and ready to go, corporal?" I nodded, and he moved on to ask the same question to a number of Marines. As the dignitaries started to arrive, I noticed that De Gaulle and Selassie didn't speak to each other, and if they did, I doubt that De Gaulle would have heard anything because he was at least a foot taller than the emperor.

The procession was starting to form, and everyone was in their place when the casket of the president was being brought down the steps. Right behind the casket was Mrs. Kennedy and her two children, each holding their mother's hand. Beside them walked the attorney general, Robert Kennedy, and behind them was the rest of the Kennedy family and close friends. The president's casket was loaded on the horse-drawn caisson, and we proceeded to St. Matthew's Cathedral

for the funeral mass.

When the mass was over, the casket was the first to come out followed by Mrs. Kennedy, the children, and the rest of the family, then came the dignitaries. President De Gaulle and Emperor Selassie came around the caisson and stood right next to each other at approximately four feet from where I was standing. Then they proceeded to their limousine, which was three cars back of the procession. Behind the casket that was on the caisson was a riderless horse that was jet black, and his name was Black Jack. He was a little jumpy, but the army sergeant who was leading him was very proficient in controlling him. There was a saddle on Black Jack, and the stirrups had black boots on backward. It was very sad but also very spectacular.

As we started to march from the cathedral, we were in “durge” mode, meaning that the cadence was very, very slow—one step every two seconds. We would do this all the way to the Arlington National Cemetery. We marched at a crawling pace, but there were thousands of people standing on the sidewalk, and there was no noise at all from them. All you could hear was the sound of the muffled drum from the army band. It took about three hours for the entire procession to reach the national cemetery. As the limos came up to the grave site, they emptied, and the dignitaries went around the grave. We were standing at the far right of the grave, and President De Gaulle and Emperor Selassie came up and stood right in front of me.

I was looking over the crowd that was now on the hill and at the bottom of the road to see if anything was going to happen. As Cardinal Cushing, the archbishop of Boston and a very close friend of the Kennedy family, came to do the final blessing, the crowd even became quieter than usual. The whole ceremony took another forty-five minutes, and then the dignitaries got into their limo and were gone. The only good thing about being at the national cemetery was that we were not too far from the Marine Headquarters that was on 8th and I streets, and the bus was down the hill to take us back.

I stayed at the headquarters for another four days with no orders,

and every time I would inquire about what I was supposed to do, I would be told to “hang in there and wait it out.” I also reminded the duty officer that I originally had orders to Quantico, and I was ready to go. But he said that I should just relax and see what would happen. Due to the assassination of the president, all orders have been canceled, and no one really knew what was going on. The Marines moved a regiment down to the Miami area just in case they had to jump off and go into Cuba.

I’d been at the headquarters for five days after the funeral, and it didn’t look as if I was going to get out of there any time soon. We were still on lock down so there was no liberty to go into the city, but one thing the headquarters had that a lot of other bases hadn’t was a first-class movie theater and a grand NCO Club with a first-class restaurant. Between going to the movies every night and going to dinner at the NCO Club, I was getting pretty lazy. But I was running at minimum of ten miles a day, five miles in the morning and five miles in the afternoon. I would run the track, and one lap around the track was half a mile. It became rather boring, but I needed something to keep me in relatively descent shape.

I was on the track this one afternoon when a lance corporal came running up and said that I was needed in the CO’s office right away. He also said I didn’t need to change, but I had to get there immediately. “A big wig from the Naval Department is there to see you.”

I immediately started to jog toward the headquarters, and I started to think, *Who do I know from the Naval Department, or better still, who the hell would want to see me from the Naval Department?*

As I knocked on the hatch, I heard a very familiar voice yell, “Get your ass centered in the hatch, Marine.” It was the commander, and now he was telling people he was from the Naval Department.

“Nice to see you again, Commander,” I greeted him. “I understand that you’re some kind of big wig with the Naval Department,” I said with a great big smile.

“Do you want me to tell some lance corporal that I’m from the

CIA, and I need to see Corporal Coleman because I've got a job for him?" he said rather sarcastically.

"What's the job? Am I going to Cuba? I got to do something soon because I'm going crazy here doing absolutely nothing. How come they haven't sent me down to Quantico?"

"Because they were told not to send you anywhere because we knew we would have a job for you, but we weren't sure what or who it would be. Now we know."

"Have you ever heard of the Matranga crime family out of New Orleans or the Trafficante crime family out of Tamps, Florida?" he asked, knowing I had no idea who they were.

"No, not off hand, but what do they have to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with you and what you can do within the next couple of weeks before you go to Cuba," he said while taking out a huge folder from his briefcase and putting it on the general's desk.

"There is a man named Carlos Marcello that is the boss of the Matranga crime family in New Orleans, which is part of the Mafia. You've heard of the Mafia, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. I've heard of the Mafia. Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, and the like. I know who they are."

"Well, it seems that Marcello had a grudge against John Kennedy and his brother Bobby. When John was president and Bobby was attorney general, they had Marcello deported to Guatemala because that's where he said he was born, which was a lie. He was born in Tunis to Sicilian parents. He came back sooner than thought, and he made many threats against the president. Oswald, the one who supposedly shot Kennedy, had spent a long time in New Orleans; and Jack Ruby, who killed Oswald, was a known associate of Marcello's."

"Where does the traffic guy come in?" I asked kind of sheepishly because I couldn't remember their names.

"Trafficante. Well, there is a Cuban exile name of Gomez, who is a paid assassin who had done some work for Santo Trafficante, the head

of the family. Santo has openly said terrible things regarding how the president should die and a true killer who works for the boys in New Orleans. Now we have positive information that both Gomez and a shooter for the Matranga family who works directly for Marcello were both in Dallas at the same time of the assassination.”

“What’s the name of the shooter?” I asked with a curious apprehension.

“His name is Giacomo Spigarelli, and he’s credited with at least twenty killings for the family. He’s a cold-blooded killer who isn’t afraid of anyone.” He put the shooter’s picture on the table along with the picture of Diego Gomez, the Cuban freedom fighter who had become a killer for hire, especially with the Mafia types.

“What’s the assignment?” I asked, still looking at the pictures.

“Well, we have one hang-up, and it’s a big one. The CIA cannot by law operate within the borders of the United States. Now if you are caught by the authorities, we can’t get you out. You’ll be on your own, but you must get these two. So you send a message to the bad guys that they can’t just kill a president and get away with it.”

“If you want to send a message, why don’t you just put a bullet into one of the bosses, like the traffic man?” I said, knowing what was coming next.

“It’s Trafficante, you dumb son of bitch. Why can’t you remember that name?” he said with his face turning red.

“I know what his name is, but it’s fun seeing you go crazy when I do this,” I said, laughing. “Okay, is anyone going to be with me as a spotter or guide?”

“Yes, and he will be here tomorrow. Do you remember Sean Callahan from Vietnam? He’s going to be with you all the way. Seems before he went to Southeast Asia, he lived in the New Orleans area for ten years, and he knows almost everything about the area and the Matranga crime family. He has a personal relationship with old Giacomo,” he got excited explaining everything to me.

"Now do you know if Gomez and Spigarelli are together, or have they separated? It's been over two weeks since the shooting in Dallas. If they are together, it should be a piece of cake but separated may cause a problem getting the second guy, no matter who it is," I explained while going through the pictures.

"What do you mean by that?" He looked very interested in what I had to say for the first time.

"Well, if they are together, then it should only take two bullets to take care of this mission. But if one is say in New Orleans and the other is in Los Angeles, then it's going to be very difficult to get the second guy, no matter who or where. Let me explain. Once the first guy goes down, this will alert the second one that someone may be after him. He'll either go underground to hide, or he'll take off and then it's a chase to the end. Does that make sense?" I said, now looking at him and taking a seat.

"I think you're right about getting the two together, but they are not part of the same crew. Both are guns for hire."

"Just like me," I said, interrupting him with as little contempt that I could muster.

"Exactly," he commented, not to be mean but matter-of-fact.

"We know Spigarelli is still in New Orleans. They must think that we believe Oswald was the only shooter, and they won't be expecting any type of retaliation. I do agree with you that once one has been eliminated, the other will know we are coming for them."

We—I didn't remember the commander going through the jungles of Cambodia and Vietnam on our way to Saigon and President Diem's demise. I guessed this was the way it would always be with all the big shorts back in Washington or Langley taking the credit, and if something goes wrong, giving the blame. We were going over everything that the commander had brought, especially the pictures of the two subjects. He kept saying, "Make sure you study the faces because you never know if they will change their appearance."

Now they were known to be in the New Orleans area, but the

commander said they were probably not in New Orleans but across the Mississippi in Baton Rouge. This was where all the seedy people of New Orleans would come to gamble, drink, and screw women, especially prostitutes. Prostitution runs rampant there, and the Mafia is the one in control. "You never want to go to Baton Rouge by yourself because you may never come out" was what he was saying, and it sounded as if he had first-hand experience in the happenings of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We were at this for about six hours until we took our first break.

"Where is your rifle?" the commander asked out of the blue.

"It's in the trunk of my car, under the spare tire. Why do you ask?"

"I don't want you to bring it in the barracks because there are too many eyes, and people will start asking questions that they shouldn't. Oh, by the way, you and Sean will be driving to New Orleans in your car. You know that you are not to get a ticket or get into any trouble on the way down there. It should take you about two days to get there. Once there, Sean knows the hotel you'll be staying in. It's not going to be in New Orleans proper but in one of the parishes."

"What the hell is a parish? Sounds like church."

"A parish is like a county in other states. Remember, Louisiana's population is almost 100 percent white, and if they are not, then they are Cajun. Cajuns mainly came from Acadia in Nova Scotia and migrated down to the Lafayette/Acadiana region. Now the Creoles are a mix of many people—white and blacks mostly. Some of them came from the Caribbean and from up north. Because New Orleans is a port town, meaning it's on the water, the culture is a huge mix of other cultures. The Creole language is mostly influenced by the Africans and the slaves from the West Indies. It's almost like baby talk because most people don't understand it, and when you're talking to a Creole, they talk to you like you are a baby. Now wasn't that interesting?"

"Yeah, and all I asked was what was a parish? In Boston, especially the Dorchester area, everyone who lives there will tell you where they live by the parishes. They will say I live in St. Peter's Parish or St.

Thomas's Parish. Even non-Catholics will do this. I had a friend that was Jewish. He lived in Dorchester, and he lived in St. Mark's Parish. That's what he would tell people. Now the history lesson on the Cajuns and the Creoles was very interesting, but do you think while I'm in New Orleans or Baton Rouge or any other fucking place down there, I will meet any of them?"

"You are a fucking credent," he said and stormed out of the room.

Now I'm thinking to myself, *Why in God's name he got so pissed when I was making fun of his history lesson. I really don't see why I have to know all this shit, but I don't want to be insubordinate.* So when he came back, I would apologize to him and then listen to other history lessons he was going to give me. I knew he was going to do it just to piss me off.

The following morning, Sean showed up at 0800 hours, and we met in the mess hall. I was asking him a bunch of questions that he wasn't going to answer, like where he had been since the last time I saw him and had there been any blow back from the mission in Vietnam. That question really got me a very dirty look from him. After I figured out he wasn't talking, I started talking about sports, especially baseball, my favorite. To my amazement, he also was a big baseball fan, and as we waited for the commander, we talked about the Red Sox and, of course, Sean's favorite team, the Yankees. Just as we started getting into a very heated discussion about the two teams, the commander came in and sat with us.

"Before we start, sir, I want to offer my sincere apology to you regarding me making fun of your history lesson yesterday. I was really out of line, and it won't happen again."

"I accept it, but I know it won't be the last time you do that," he answered, looking right at Sean and not at me. "Finish up your breakfast, and let's get going on what we must learn and what Sean is bringing to the table."

And the commander got out of his seat and started walking toward the door. This reminded me of boot camp: When the drill instructor

was finished eating, you better be out on the drill field, ready to go. We left everything on the table and ran after him.

We went back to the conference room, and after the commander had put up on the chalkboard all the information and pictures of people we would have to know or recognize, we were ready to proceed. "Giacomo Roberto Spigarelli. Born in San Vito Lo Capo, Sicily on April 10, 1936, to a Maria and Giuseppe Spignuchelli. He changed his name when he came to the States. His father was a fisherman but died in a boating accident when Giacomo or James was only ten years old. His mother had family living in Chicago, so she and her three children came here right after the war. They settled in Chicago, and James got involved with some young tuffs who worked for the Outfit. The Outfit was a crime syndicate based in Chicago dating back to the 1910s.

"When Giacomo was fourteen years old, he quit school and was hanging with a bunch of teenagers who were street punks who worked for the '42 Gang,' which had become part of the Outfit. He became a favorite of the head of the 42 Gang and the future head of the Chicago Mafia, Salvatore Giancana, better known as Sam Giancana. He took our boy under his wing and taught him everything he needed to know to be a good underboss." He took a break for a drink of water, and then he continued, "Supposedly and never been confirmed by any higher-ups in the company that in 1960, the CIA recruited Giancana and other Mafia mobsters to assassinate Castro. One remark by Giancana that really has upset the company was when he said that the CIA and the Costra Nostra were 'different sides of the same coin,' and this may have been the reason the company canceled any dealings with the Mafia, especially Giancana." And he stopped talking just to see what we had to say.

"Now this is a history lesson that I can really get into," I said with full belief. "I'm a little confused in that Giancana is in Chicago, but Spigarelli is supposed to be associated with the New Orleans Mafia. What is the connection if any?"

"Well, in 1958, there was a former Outfit member, Willie Mishetti,

who was arrested by Phoenix police for murdering the Outfit's accountant, Gus Greenbaum, and his wife. The reason for these murders was due to Greenbaum skimming money from the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas. The Outfit paid Mishetti to take both of them out and to do it so brutally that it would send a message. He stabbed them over fifty times each and cut their throats so deep that their heads were almost off. The bigger problem the Outfit had was when Mishetti was captured because he wanted to make a plea deal. The deal was that he would only get ten years in a federal prison, and he would give up everyone from the Chicago Mafia and the Outfit." Again, he took a little time-out for water and questions if we had any.

"Giancana got wind of what was going on down in Arizona, and he got his protégé, Giacomo, now known on the streets as 'Jamie' to go to Phoenix and take care of Mishetti before he tells the Feds anything. Jamie got to Phoenix right before Christmas and went to jail and spoke to Mishetti. Right after the visit, Mishetti was let out on bail, which Jamie paid for, and then he was found on Christmas day in his motel room with a bullet at the back of his head. Jamie was on a plane out of Phoenix to New Orleans on Christmas Day, and he's been there ever since. Now the crazy thing about this is that Giancana supposedly had made a deal with the president's father Joseph Kennedy when Jack was running for president. According to rumor, Giancana promised the old man Chicago's vote to Jack in return for Bobby to stop prosecuting the Mafiosi through the McClellan hearings. Everything would be fine until a bombshell went off. An underling but a Mafia member Joseph Valachi gave the American public a firsthand account of Mafia activities in the United States. Not only did this become a first-rate television, but it also made the chairman of the committee a household word. Also, Sen. John McClellan of Arkansas wasn't going to back off the Mafia under any circumstances.

"Because of these hearings, Giancana needed Bobby to back off, and Joseph Kennedy made that promise. Of course, Chicago and the outlying regions went for Kennedy in a landslide. But the biggest

problem with all of this was when Jack appointed Bobby attorney general of the United States, and the first thing he did when he took over the Justice Department was to go after the Mafia. Bobby was hot after Jimmy Hoffa, the president of the Teamsters Union and a close associate of many of the Mafia dons. On the office wall of the attorney general was a picture of Hoffa, and underneath was printed, 'Get Him.' Mobsters like Carlos Marcello, Sam Giancana, Johnny Roselli, Charles Nicoletti, and Santo Trafficante Jr. —all of whom worked with the CIA on the Castro assassination plots in 1960, and they also topped the list of suspects in the senate committee investigating CIA and Cosa Nostra collusion in plots to assassinate Fidel Castro." He took a great big breath in finishing and a long drink of water.

"Fascinating," I said with sincerity. "I never really knew how powerful the Mafia is in the United States and how many men have such funny names." And I started to laugh uncontrollably.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Now the commander was really angry. "This is information that you should have in your head so you can discern about who you should shoot. These are the bad guys, and we aren't."

"No. All kidding aside, I really found this information interesting. But one question, are we sure that Spigarelli is really involved in the assassination of Kennedy? And what about that Cuban Gomez? Where does he fit in this?"

"Santo Trafficante Jr. is the mob boss of the Tampa Bay area and all cities there in and around that area. He ascended to being boss after his father, Santo Sr., died in 1954. The Tampa mob made a lot of money from the Casinos in Havana, and when Castro took over and closed all the gambling establishments, Trafficante lost more than ten million dollars a month. Trafficante Jr. was Cuban and lived in Havana during the late forties to the early fifties when he came back to Tampa and took over the mob once again. Trafficante hated Castro, and he would associate with all the refugees that came from Cuba, especially any of them that worked for the Mafia down there. Late in the fifties,

around fifty-eight or fifty-nine when the freedom boats were traveling from Cuba to the US, a young freedom fighter came ashore in Miami and made his way to Tampa. His name was Vicente Gomez, and he was an enforcer for the Tampa mob in Havana working in the casinos, which Trafficante owned. As he settled to the American way, Gomez is suspected in the killings of many of the Mafia members who ran afoul of Santo Trafficante Jr.

“Santo always was saying how JFK would get his because of the promises his father made and never kept and also because his brother wouldn’t do what he was told. Trafficante is a prime suspect because about a month before the assassination in Dallas, he had a meeting with Jack Ruby, the guy who shot Oswald in New Orleans and Carlos Marcello. Along with Giancana from Chicago, Trafficante Jr. from Tampa Bay, and Marcello from New Orleans, these three absolutely hated the Kennedys, especially the patriarch, Joseph, for lying about what he could get his son to do once he was president. The only problem we have right now is no one knows where Gomez is. We have all our people out looking for him, but it seems that the earth has swallowed him up.”

“Are we sure that he’s still alive? Just listening to your dissertation about the Mafia, it doesn’t seem that they would think twice in killing Gomez and doing away with his body. To protect themselves against incrimination if and when they were going to be called in front of the house or senate,” I said, really starting to get into this whole scenario.

“One thing I’ve found out about the Mafia over the years is they have a hard time keeping secrets. There is always someone who wants to brag that he killed this one or that one and doesn’t care who knows it. He may never tell the authorities, but he’ll tell someone who will tell someone who will tell the authorities. Never is anyone safe when it comes to keeping secrets about the killings done by the mob,” the commander said.

Sean was sitting at the far end of the table and was looking kind of bored when all of a sudden, he interrupted the commander, “I think

I saw this man in Nueva Gerona a few months ago. There's a prison there, the Presidio Modelo, and all the political prisoners who either don't agree with Castro and Castro not agreeing with them are sent there to usually die. He was an inmate, a political prisoner. Maybe he went there for protection. I will have my people in Havana check it out and get back to us."

"How far is this Nueva Gerona from Havana?" I asked, and I don't know why because I really didn't care.

"I know you're just busting my balls right now, but I really do know the answer to your question. Nueva Gerona is the capital of the Isla de la Juventud, which is an island eighty-six miles NW of Havana."

"Is there a way that we can get a shot at this guy while he's in prison? Can you find out how long he's supposed to be there, what date he's going to get out and where he would go once released?" The commander was really interested in this new information.

"Well, we at least know where one of them is. Now my question is, why kill Spigarelli? I thought the ones we want are Marcello, Giancana, and Trafficante. Why not them?"

"To kill those three could cause a lot of problems with whom will take their places. We let everyone know that we are aware that the three Mafia bosses are involved in JFK's assassination and that we are going after the shooter, but it would be just as easy for us to go after the bosses. This will send a very big message to them not to screw with the government unless you don't mind extreme retaliation." The commander slammed his hand down on the table for effect.

"Where is Spigarelli now?" I asked with more questions to follow.

"He's in Baton Rouge, or he was late last night. I have a detachment watching him around the clock. He's running one of the many warehouses in Baton Rouge."

"Does he ever come outside? It's not going to be easy getting him if he stays in the warehouse all the time and no collateral damage this time. Him and only him. Okay?" I was looking at both Sean and the commander this time.

“Sometimes collateral damage can’t be helped. Once a week, he goes to a meeting with Marcello in New Orleans. He takes the River Road from Baton Rouge seventy miles to New Orleans, and there are many places where you can set up and wait like the banks of the river, the many levees, and even the beautiful plantation houses that spread for more than seventy miles. The only problem is that he never travels alone. He always has his second in command with him who is also a mobster.”

“Now would you call him collateral damage or just a hood in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

After a couple more meetings with the commander, I finally got my TDY orders to report to the Marine Corps Recruiting Station in New Orleans within six days of receiving these orders. I also got a check for \$150.00 for transportation on the way down, and I am to stay at the Naval Hotel on NAS, New Orleans. The trip was uneventful with a lot of small talks between Sean and me. I learned that Sean is a naturalized citizen from Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he was a member of the IRA or the Irish Republican Army. He told me that in December 1956, he was involved up to his nose as he put it in an operation against the British called the Border Campaign. It was a guerrilla warfare carried out by the IRA against targets in Northern Ireland, with the aim of overthrowing the British rule there and creating a united Ireland. It turned out to be a military failure, but for some of its members, the campaign was justified as it had kept the IRA engaged for another generation.

Sean said that after the failure of this campaign, a reward was offered for any information regarding the leaders of the IRA in general and, in particular, the leaders of Operation Harvest, which was the codename for the Border Campaign. Sean was one of the leaders, and he made his way to Dublin, where he took a merchant ship to New York. For a couple of months, he got lost in the big city. In June of 1957, he was arrested by an FBI agent who lived in the same walk-up, and he did and was being held for deportation back to Northern

Ireland, where he would stand trial. Before he was to be deported, the commander came to see him in Ray Brook Federal Correctional Institution in Ray Brook, New York, about fifty-two miles from Plattsburgh, New York, and right on Saranac Lake. He made him an offer to come to work for him at the CIA as part of his release. I asked him what they told the British government why he wasn't deported. He said that they said he was killed trying to escape with a number of other political prisoners. He also told me that his real name was not Sean Callahan, but I knew well enough not to ask what his real name was. He had some great stories to tell, and then I asked him why he was in Cambodia and Vietnam. He said that he knew that the commander had come up with the perfect shooter, and it was going to be his job to get me to Saigon and then out. "I'm what you call a facilitator, which means, in CIA language, that I go in before anyone, get the lay of the land, and then find out everything about the subject and then send it back to the commander for him to decipher and then give it to you. It's worked out well so far, but this is a hurry-up mission, and to be truthful, I'm not so sure it's going to work."

"It seems the commander has a strong hand in these things, and I don't understand why you don't think this will work. Do you think he's putting us in a compromised position?"

"No, I don't think anything is going to happen to us. When you hit the subject, he'll probably be by himself, and no one will have the fantast idea who did and why. That's what bothers me. We are doing this to tell the Maria dons that we know you killed President Kennedy, but we're not going to retaliate on you but on your shooter. It's like if someone wanted to get even with say the commander, he wouldn't shoot you, but he'd go after the commander. I don't understand why we don't shoot one of the big shots in the Mafia and then let them know we did it and we can do it again," he spoke very passionately, and his Irish accent seemed to become heavier with every sentence.

"The commander told me that the Mafia guys will know the CIA condoned this, and that there would not be any repercussions after it

was done.”

“That’s all great, but it doesn’t get to the guys who authorized this. Spigarelli is a small fish in a huge pond. You kill him, and in five minutes, there’s another to take his place, and they are usually worse than the first one.”

“You make sense, but orders are orders. And mine are to find Spigarelli and put a bullet in his head. No questions asked. I have to do what I’m told to do.”

“And I do also, but I’m just saying that Giancana and Trafficanti are going to get away with organizing the hit on Kennedy. And I do believe they will probably do it again. Next time somewhere, it could be Robert Kennedy. You know they really don’t like him.”

We then started to listen to the radio, but I kept thinking about what Sean had said and how it made a lot of sense. I knew there must be a reason for all of this, but you don’t kill a servant when the master order the hit, or maybe you do both. After that conversation, the rest of the trip was rather quiet. We stopped once overnight in the Florida panhandle in the small town of Destin, Florida. A very small motel with a coffee shop attached was just perfect in what we were looking for.

The next morning after breakfast, we left for our final destination which was around 250 miles or about eight hours on the back roads. We made sure that we never went above the speed limit, and when in traffic, we looked like a couple of guys looking for a good time in New Orleans. We had purchased fishing gear in Destin and had it sticking out of the back window so everyone would think we were going on a fishing trip. It was rather humid here in December, but at breakfast, the waitress told us that this was rather unusual because it would be cool in the daytime and cold at night. As we approached New Orleans, the weather started to get very cloudy, and the wind was picking up.

“Is this usual down here? Not the cold or the rain, but it’s the wind that concerns me,” I said with a bit of worry in my voice.

“Why does the wind bother you that much? Shooting is shooting.

You should hit him with no sweat. I've seen you shoot," he said with a lot of praise.

"Well, back then, I had a spotter who could tell me the wind velocity and what I needed to correct my sights too. We don't have that here. I'm not even sure how far away I will be from the subject. Wind is my worst enemy. I do this for one shot, clean and deadly. The wind can cause the bullet to drift for a 1/8 of an inch to possibly two inches. If I miss a subject by that much, then he'll probably live. I either have to get very close, or there has to be as little wind as possible or even better, no wind at all."

We arrived in New Orleans in possibly the worst rainstorm that I'd ever seen. The wind was blowing like a hurricane, and the rain was sideways. We went directly to NAS New Orleans, and I checked into the hotel on base. Then we left for the city. We had dinner in the French Quarter on Bourbon Street in a very quaint restaurant, which happened to look over the Mississippi River. It was a quiet night, and we didn't really have that much to talk about. We finished our dinner at around 2100.

"Let's take a ride over to Baton Rouge and check out some of the night life," Sean said rather loud.

We paid the bill and then went and got the car and headed for Baton Rouge, which is eighty miles down the 10 freeway, or if you're not in a hurry, you can take State Highway 18. We arrived in Baton Rouge at 2330, and the rain had stopped. But the humidity was even worse than during the daytime. We walked up and down the streets where they had men out front, trying to get all the visitors to their fare city to come in and get robbed or something even worse. The reputations of these seedy bars went as far as Washington, and everyone would tell you to have eyes at the back of your head.

As we walked, we were just talking about nothing when Sean stopped and said under his breath, "That's James's place, the Flamingo, just like the one the organization runs in Las Vegas. He'd probably get confused if someone changed the name."

“Does he have an office that overlooks something from the outside, or does he have a favorite table where he eats at? I need something that I can sight in on and get a range from and know how far and what it may have to go through.”

“His office is right behind the sign, and his favorite table is way at the back next to the orchestra. He does walk around the floor quite a bit, and I think there is a bedroom on the third floor that may be his. I couldn’t find out too much about what he did without creating some people getting interested in why I was asking.”

“Well, I need to bring back my scope and see what I can see from here, and then we need to see if we can go into one of the offices across from the Flamingo at night. Do you or any of your people know who owns these buildings here?” I pointed at the buildings directly across from Spigarelli’s lair.

“I’ll have them check it out in the morning, and we’ll have an answer by 1200 hours. If this doesn’t work, we can always go back to the original plan that the commander had,” Sean said with a frown.

“The one on the highway? No, I don’t want to use that. Too many cars. If he’s going at a fast rate of speed, then it’s going to be very difficult to hit him with one shot. I’d have to be in front of him looking directly at him. Impossible.”

We went back to my hotel room on the base and started to think of different scenarios by which Spigarelli could be hit by one bullet. We even spoke of trying to get him out front of the Flamingo, but we couldn’t think of a good reason. The only thing we came up with was burning down the building. As we sat there talking, I took out the scope and made sure it was clean, and then I took out the Remington and started to clean that also.

Suddenly, I said, “Tomorrow night, we will go back and see what is happening with the building across the street. Your people should have the answers by then, shouldn’t they?” I was packing the rifle in the haversack and then putting the scope on the table. “Time to hit the hay. You want to stay over?” I pointed to the two twin beds.

“No, I’m going to go back to Baton Rouge and see what I can find out about the Flamingo and how it’s set up.”

“You want me to go with you?” I asked, but I really didn’t want to do.

“No. Remember, you’re still in the Marines, and you have to be here by midnight. So you get your sleep, and I’ll call you tomorrow and pick you up in the afternoon. Have a great sleep.” And he went out the door.

I took a shower and got ready for bed. As I was lying there, I started to think about the shots I could take. If we did the highway, I could get beside him and just unload twenty rounds for the magazine into the car. That would probably take care of him, but the chances of us being caught would be very high. I also could set up in the building right across the street and just wait for a clean shot in his office. I’ve got to find out where his desk is in regard to the window and if that sign covers the whole window or just a percentage of it. I could tell it was going to be another sleepless night.

I got up about 0630 and went for a run around the base, mostly to get a sense of where I was and if there was a way to get onto the base without being seen. I ran all around the base, and as I was coming around the far runway, I noticed a big hole in the ground where some excavation was done. It looked like it was forgotten. The hole went all the way to the fence, but there was dirt piled onto the fence. I went closer to look at the digging, and as I moved around, I didn’t notice the car that just pulled up.

“Can I help you with something?” A very strong voice yelled out from on top of the digging. A very large navy chief with an MP arm band on his right sleeve told me that I was being stopped by the cops.

“No, Chief. Just being nosey. I’m just out for a run, and I saw the excavation and just wondered what it was. My name is Corporal James Coleman on TDY to the Marine Recruiters Office in New Orleans.”

“Well, Corporal, this area is restricted. An LTV A-7 Corsair crashed here about a month ago, and this is what is left. The NCIS

teams have been over this area like locusts because there were some crazy things that happened to the plane prior to take off. The one thing was the crew chief held up the three tags that show the evacuation seat is armed and ready to go, but when they looked at the plane, the three tags were still in the seat, showing that it would not eject. But why again are you out here?"

"I've been sent down here to check on the recruiting practices here and in other southern towns, and I just went for a run, which I do every day just to stay in shape. Saw this hole and got nosey, just that. Didn't see any signs saying it was a restricted area, but I wasn't looking for them either," I was trying to sound as sure of myself as I could.

"Oh, that's alright then. Just keep running following the fence, and that will bring you back to the hotel," he said with a smile.

How the hell does he know that I'm staying at the hotel?

"And before you go, I just got one more question for you, Corporal. Who's the other man that was in your room last night after you came in at 2300 and left around midnight?" he asked again with a smile on his face.

"His name is Sean Callahan, and he and I went to high school together in Boston. He's been living down here for a few years, and when I found out I was coming here, I called him to get together. Just a friend."

"Well, if you're going to have company, make sure you tell the front desk because they called my office for us to check it out."

"Well, nothing going on that's kinky, just a couple of high school friends. Well, got to go. Have to be at the recruiters at 1000 hours. Have a good day." And I turned and started to jog following the fence as he said.

As I started to run, I could sense that the truck carrying the Navy chief was starting to follow me. I just kept running around the base until I came to the street that would take me to the hotel. As I started down the street, I turned and ran backward, and I waved goodbye to the chief, but I got no response, except the truck took off to the left.

As I turned back, I started to laugh, and then I thought that no matter where I would go in the future, I would always be the subject of the police or at least someone in charge.

“Well, our cover has been blown here on base,” I said to Sean as his car started toward the gate and then downtown New Orleans. I then went on to explain what had transpired during my run this morning and how he had asked all sorts of questions regarding Sean and me.

“He assumes we’re queer. I was going to tell him I’m in the Marines and not a fag navy man, but I thought twice about doing that. Now we have to find the recruiting office on Dauphine Street, and I have to be there by 1000.”

“I know where the office is at, and it’s only 8045 just in case you want to stop and get something to eat.”

“Might as well we can’t dance.”

He looked at me, confused, “Marine expression. Doesn’t mean anything.”

As we drove into the city, it was very hectic. It wasn’t what I thought it would be, but then Sean explained that a lot of people didn’t realize that there was a business area to New Orleans, and it’s just not the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. We found the recruiting office, and then there was a restaurant right next door. So we went in and had breakfast. A lot of people were staring at me, and I couldn’t figure out why until I said something to Sean, and he just said one word, “Uniform.” That was right. I was in my tropical uniform, and I guessed the people here didn’t see many Marines, seeing this was a Navy town.

I told Sean that I would go in by myself, and if I was not out by 1100, I told him to come and get me. As I went up to the door, I kept thinking what reason I was going to tell these people why I was here and that I wouldn’t be staying and I was going off with a civilian.

As I opened the door to go in, I noticed this Gunnery Sergeant come from behind his desk and sauntered right up to me.

“Coleman. I’m Gunny Hatcher. Timothy John.” He stuck this huge

hand that look like a side of beef out for me to shake it. I hesitated a little, and I did look down at the hand. "I won't break your hand. I promise." He let out the loudest laugh that seemed to shake the walls.

"Nice to meet you, Gunny. Corporal James Coleman reporting." I was standing at attention.

"Let me introduce you around. The fair young lady and bad ass Marine is LCpl. Judy Antonelli just returning from the Naval Air Station in Rota, Spain. Sharp as a tack. On the other side is our black brother, Sgt. Thaddeus T. Robinson, but I just call him Jackie after one of the greatest baseball players ever, Jackie Robinson. At the back office—and we'll go in there in a minute—is our commanding officer, Capt. Joshua P. Pittman, and he's one of the best officers you'll ever meet, not at all by the book."

As we were standing in the middle of the floor, talking, a very large man came from the back of the office. "Welcome, Corporal. We've all heard a lot about you. You're some kind of shooting fanatic. Here to compete in some kind of competition and just needed some place to say you hung your hat. Is that right?" This was Captain Pittman, who was about six feet four. He had the biggest smile, and his hands were huge also.

"I don't know if I'd call myself a fanatic, but I'm pretty good," I said with all modesty.

"Well, I was informed by Headquarters Marine Corps that you're in some kind of competition and that you're going to be down here for practice in this humid weather and you'll be in and out most of the time. Let me tell you that if you need anything from us, you just have to ask." One thing about officers and staff NCOs was when they would talk about Washington and headquarters, it was always Headquarters Marine Corps. I'd never met one who didn't call it that even when other people knew what they were talking about.

We stood around and had a cup of coffee and just shot the shit. They asked about the rifle team, and I made up something that I

thought they'd buy because I knew absolutely nothing about the rifle team, except they were out of Quantico, not Headquarters Marine Corps. They were very good and best in the service.

After about an hour, I started to get nervous, wondering where Sean was when all of a sudden, the front door opened and in he walked. "Captain, gentlemen. This is Sean Callahan, and he's my rifle instructor. He's hired by the Marine Corps, and he's with me to teach me how to shoot in humid and wet weather. Sean, this is Captain Pittman, Gunny Hatcher, Sergeant Robinson, and Lance Corporal Antonelli. I guess we must be moving out, or you wouldn't be here. Captain, is it all right with you that I'll be gone for the rest of the day and possibly tomorrow?"

"They told me that Mr. Callahan here is basically your boss down here, and that you'd be in and out. I have a copy of your orders, so if there is any trouble, then I have all the answers." He shook hands with Sean and said goodbye to me.

As we left the office and went toward Sean's car, I heard him say with a laugh in his voice, "If he only really knew what you're doing here."

We got on Highway 10 for Baton Rouge, and we were just traveling, minding our business, when a black Cadillac came up beside us and stayed there for about two minutes. The windows were blacked out, and there was no license plate. But nothing happened except they stayed with us for an unusual long time on the highway and only left us as we were entering the city limits of Baton Rouge. We didn't talk about it, but it kind of stayed at the back of my mind. I started to think maybe I was getting paranoid because of what happened on the base with the Navy chief knowing almost everything that I had done the night before.

We got to the Flamingo and drove around the block a couple of times, trying to figure out what information we needed from Sean's people. The building across the street was full of offices, and it looked

rather busy during the day. We parked the car two blocks away and started to walk back toward the action. It was noon, and there was a guy standing outside of the Flamingo trying to get tourists to come in and enjoy the “hospitality.” We went into the bar next to the Flamingo and took a corner booth waiting on Sean’s people. This wasn’t a real bar but a glorified sleazy strip joint with some over-the-hill ladies dancing on stage. We ordered a couple of beers and waited for our company, which didn’t take too long.

As I was watching the strippers, I could feel someone or something get into the bench across from me. She was beautiful, or at least beautiful for this place, and had a great smile. She had blue eyes, blonde hair, and not a bad rack, but that was all I could see right then. She was in the age group of say forty or older but well preserved. She leaned over on to Sean’s shoulder and nibbled at his ear, but he didn’t look like he minded. This went on for about five minutes, and then she sat straight up and screamed something that I didn’t understand. She stood up and slapped Sean a good one across his face and then stormed out.

“One of your admirers, I guess,” I said to him, almost laughing.

“Not an admirer but an employee. Got the information we were waiting for. Drink up, not too fast, and let’s get out of here.”

We finished the beers, left a tip, waved to the ladies dancing, and strolled out the front door. Sean said that we walk down the street for a while and then cross the street and walk back up the street to our car. As we walked, I could feel eyes on me all the time. We walked past the office building, and Sean said that Spigarelli owned the building and that all the offices were filled with his people. We crossed the street again and got into the car and slowly drove off. On the outskirts of the city, we pulled off, and I started to listen to the information that Sean had found out.

“It seems our boy James owns that office building across the street, and the only tenants are people who work for him and those he trusts. It’s a four-story building with a flat roof, but Flamingo is only three

stories, so you'd be shooting down. He said his girl was trying to get a master key for all the offices, but she said it may take a while, which we really didn't have. She said the windows overlooking the street were bay windows, but the sign cut off some of the window. She wasn't sure how much and if you could see into it from the roof and where the subject would be sitting or if he would be walking around."

"I've got to get into that building. I need to see the office that is on the same level as his window," I said with urgency.

"By the way, are you using a silencer?" he asked with a quizzical look.

"No, why?"

"Without a silencer, the shot will be heard all over the street, and it will be almost impossible to get out of here without being seen. Why aren't you using one?"

"A silencer makes the bullet do crazy things. When I was testing this rifle last year, I tried a few times, but the accuracy is way off. I know the recoil will make a noise, but I feel better without one. That way, I'm sure I'll hit the subject with one shot," I tried to explain as easily as I could. "I have a silencer back at the hotel. When I figure out how far it will be from the office building to Spigarelli's office and his body, then I will try to test the silencer with the rifle for accuracy. If it doesn't work, then I'll have to go without it and fuck the noise. It should take one shot, and then we're out of there. Park the car as close to the exit door, and hopefully, we'll be gone before them or should I say Jimmy boy knows what hit him."

"It's going to be dark by 1900 this evening, so we can try to get to the roof then and see if you have a shot. My lady should have the results of the master key by tomorrow morning. I'll be in touch with her later this evening. How are you going to get the distance from here to there?"

"It's got something to do with azimuths and diagram and all sorts of math. That's why Tomelli is so important to me. He'd have that figured out even before we see the sight. He's fantastic, but he wants to

be a shooter, not just a spotter. As far as I know, he's still in Pendleton, but I haven't spoken to him for about two months. If I don't call him, I don't hear. The last time I spoke with him, he got engaged and is going to get married next year, and I'm going to be his best man. One of the all-time great guys in life. I really could use him here for this. Nothing against you, but he knows exactly what to do and what is needed, and you've never been trained for this."

I didn't want to hurt Sean's feelings, and by the way he was looking at me, I knew he wanted to help that was why I told him that he wasn't trained for this. We started back toward New Orleans, and as we started to go down Highway 10, Sean stopped on the side of the road and looked at me.

"If we are seen leaving the shooting and they send someone after us, they will probably think we'll take the main highway which is 10, but if we take 18, it will be a little slower. There are a number of places we can pull off and hide. What do you think?"

"Doesn't matter to me as long as we don't get caught. Highway 18 sounds fine, but how will you know if someone is coming after us? My people will call me on the walkie-talkie, and they will see anyone who leaves the Flamingo right after we are finished with Mr. Spigarelli."

We got back to New Orleans and went directly to the Naval Base Hotel and into my room. My bags were always packed because I learned a long time ago to always live out of your suitcase. As I was looking for the silencer, a knock came at the door.

"Sean, will you get that?" I was not expecting anyone, especially no trouble.

As Sean opened the door, I could see trouble standing right at the center of the door.

"Gentlemen, welcome back. We've been waiting to speak with you for most of the morning," he said, stepping into the room and leaving the other two SPs standing outside.

"What can I do for you, Chief?" I left the bag where it was without me pulling out the silencer.

“Since the last time we spoke, I’ve been doing a little investigation on my own into what you two are doing here on my base and in my city. Corporal, there is no record of you even being on temporary duty here in New Orleans or any place else. Actually, there is no record of you at all. And your friend here is an ex-IRA soldier but has no record here in the states, and thus, I have nothing on him but you. I do.”

“What is your problem, Chief? I have done nothing to you, your base, or your city to cause you to follow me or even look into anything I’m doing. I suggest that you speak with Captain Pittman, who’s the CO at the recruiting office on Dauphine Street, and he can straighten everything out for your prying mind.” I was getting aggravated as I spoke.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what some fucking officer from the Marine Corps has to say. I’ve got you two, and it just doesn’t sit right with me. I’m going to get to the bottom of this. Take them both back to the office.” And he turned and walked out, and two SPs came in and told us to go to the car outside.

“Chief,” Sean shouted after him, “I’m just going to advise you of a few things. One thing, you have no authority over me because I’m a civilian, and unless you’re going to arrest me for something I’ve done on ‘your’ base, then you have to let me go. Second, there is—” He was cut off in mid-sentence by the chief.

“You’re right, civilian. I can’t arrest you, but I can arrest your pal. So I would recommend that you get the hell off this base, and I better never see you around here again. Is that understood?” His nose was almost touching Sean’s.

“I do understand, but I want you to understand this. Once I get to a phone and call the proper people, you’ll wish I were the only one you’d be seeing in the next few days. I will be back for the corporal, but in the meantime, I will take everything and leave.”

“No, you’ll leave without anything. I am going to confiscate the suitcases and the haversack. Now, you’re free to go.”

“Now, the other thing I was going to mention is if you look at

both suitcases and the haversack, my name is on them, so you can't confiscate these without, again, arresting me, or you face a really large lawsuit, which right now would be your best bet. I'm just going to give you a warning, and I really don't want to come back and say I told you so. But if you don't let the corporal go, you're in for more shit than you'll ever imagine."

"You know, I hear that from everyone I arrest. Seems everyone knows a senator or the president," he said with a half smirk.

"You'll wish that this were the case. But enough said, and I'll be off. I will be back in about thirty minutes to pick Jim here up, and there better not be one mark on him that's not there now."

"Are you threatening me, you Irish motherfucker?"

Sean had finally got under his skin. "No, I'm not because you have to be rational to be threatened, and you're the furthest thing from that, so I will see you in thirty." And with that, Sean grabbed all the bags and just went to his car, threw the bags in, and then just drove off to the main gate.

"What an asshole your friend is," he said, turning and walking toward his jeep as the SPs put me at the back of their truck.

As we got to the provost marshal's office, which was the chief's base, we got out, and I started to walk toward the front door. As we entered, I was directed to a door on the left of the main hallway. There was a table in the middle of the room with two chairs. The SP who escorted me in told me to sit on the far side, and someone would be with me momentarily. I waited five minutes, and then the chief entered the room. He was wearing nothing but a T-shirt.

"You are going to answer my questions, and you're not going to give me any of the bullshit that you're here to test a rifle for a shooting contest. I know you're here to shoot, but I'm not sure what it is that you're aiming at."

"I told you before, and I'll tell you again that I'm testing a new weapon in the humidity of New Orleans, and that I'm going to be on the Marine shooting team out of Quantico."

"Then who the fuck is the Irishman?" He was really starting to get upset.

"He's my instructor."

"Instructor my ass. I know for sure that all Marines that are on the shooting team have fellow Marines as instructors. Now I ask again, who the hell is the Irishman, and why are you two in New Orleans?"

"You know, Chief, I can keep this up longer than you can. I'm a shooter for the rifle team out of Quantico, and Sean Callahan, who was an expert rifleman with the Royal Marines in Belfast, is my instructor. Now you can keep asking me that same questions, but remember, I'm going to give you the same answers."

We'd been going at this now for forty-five minutes, and you could tell in the chief's eyes that he just wanted to punch the living shit out of me. As the next stanza of questions began to start, there was a knock on the door. The chief went and opened it up, and one of the SPs was standing there. He leaned in and whispered something to the chief. The chief nodded and then turned to me and said, "I don't know who you know or who the fucking Irishman knows, but you're dismissed. Free and get the fuck out of here. I know you two are up to no good, and if it takes me forever, I will find out what it is. Here's your fucking buddy. Get the hell out of my sight."

"Are you all right, Jim?" Sean said, pushing past the chief.

"Yeah, nothing even happened. I was put in here and was asked a bunch of questions, but nothing serious. I learned one thing from the chief though." They looked quizzical, especially the chief who was trying to think what he taught me. "He really doesn't like either of us a whole lot." And I got up, laughing.

"Well, it seems you have some pretty powerful friends in Washington, and you are free to go with my apologies."

"That's okay, Chief. I now know why there are a lot of rooms available in this hotel. Hospitality is not your strong suit. I guess we'll go test that rifle now." I got up and went toward the door.

"Bullshit" was the only word that came out from the chief's mouth as he stepped aside and let me pass.

Sean and I went to his car, and we slowly started to drive off the base. "Well, that was fun. Who'd you call? The commander?"

"I got in touch with the commander, and he told me to drive directly back to the base and get you out. When I arrived at the gate, I guess the chief had told the gate not to allow my car on base. As I was starting to argue with the SP, the phone rang, and he picked it up and said yes three times.

Then he came back and said that I was requested at the provost marshal's office, and he pointed me at the right direction. When I got there, the chief was behind the counter, and he said he didn't know who I called, but someone from the secretary of the Navy's office called and said to let the corporal go. That's all that happened."

"No, it isn't because I know you. What else did happen in that office?" I asked, almost laughing.

"I just reminded the chief what I had said earlier, which was 'I told you so.'" And with that, we laughed all the way off the base.

"Have you heard from your people? Did they get you a master key for the offices facing the Flamingo?"

"Yes, I heard from them, and no, they couldn't get a master key because there isn't any. Seems Spigarelli is security crazy. He had locks installed that only has one key, and he controls all the masters. No one has any idea where he keeps them," he said almost apologetically.

"Well, we have to get in there tonight to see where we can set up, and tomorrow night has to be zero hour," I said without expression.

"I will put my people on alert for tonight and tomorrow, and they'll be ready. How do you think we can get into the offices?" Sean asked very earnestly.

“Pick the lock, and if that doesn’t work, we’ll break in and take care of the mission this evening. Is that okay with you?” I had to have him on board if this was going to work.

“What about testing the silencer?” he asked out of the blue.

“Won’t have time to test it, and so I probably won’t use it. Once I fire the shot, I will say hit or miss, and with that, there’s no second shot. I will be moving by the time I say miss. One thing, when we arrive in the office building, I want you to figure two ways out—down to the street or over the roof. This is quite important if we are going to get out of this alive. We didn’t have that in Saigon, and it almost cost us. I remembered in my training that this was one of the major items to cross off when arriving at the sight, and I completely forgot it because I was too ramped up.”

“I’m sure the best exit will be down the stairs, out the back, into the car, and then get the hell out of Dodge. I’m not sure if Spigarelli’s people will come after us right away or if they will try to save his worthless ass. If they do come after us, my people are all ready to slow them down. Remember, we are going on Route 18, and hopefully, they will be on Highway 10. There’s a bridge in the middle where boats come and go, and the drawbridge has to be raised when boats are coming through. My people have three boats waiting to come through right after we clear the bridge on 18. If they are caught with the bridge up, that’s a minimum of thirty minutes head start we will have. We are going to head directly out of the city and back to Washington without delay.”

“What happens if they take 18 also and forget about Highway 10? What’s the story on what we do then?”

“I also have a number of 18 wheelers waiting on the road to make sure there is a traffic jam after we pass. Two 18 wheelers that crash into each other on a small country road will mean at least a two-hour wait, and they will make sure that no cars can get by. It’s all set, and the plans can’t fail,” he said with more assurance that I’d ever seen from him.

We took Highway 10 for Baton Rouge, and as Sean drove, I took out the silencer and check it, just in case I changed my mind and

ended up using it. The traffic was light, and the sun was starting to set in the west over the levies. It was just beautiful. I started thinking of my mother and how much she would have loved the sunset, and I was going to try to remember to tell her someday.

As we drove, Sean suddenly said, "Uh, oh. We've got company." I turned to look out the back window, but the black Cadillac came right up on Sean's door and slowed down and kept up with us for the next five miles and then sped off like the devil was after them.

"What do you think, Sean? Who do you think they are? Did you see them anywhere near the base or the city?" Those were the only questions that I could think of right away.

"No, I really think this was a coincidence and so was the last time. Remember, there is a lot of traffic from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, and we just happened to see this Cadillac at both times they were traveling. If they wanted something, they would definitely let us know who was in the vehicle or at least they would have rolled down the windows. I think we just relax, enjoy the sunset, and think about what's going to happen in the next twenty-four hours."

We pulled ahead of the Flamingo and started to walk back to the office building. A block away, we went right and then took the alley toward the building. As we approached, we could see that some of the offices were still lit with lights, which we assumed that someone was still in the office. We entered from the back and went to the third floor by the stairs, not the elevator, and when we reached the floor, we took our time opening the door to the hallway. As we approached the office that we were going to use, we could see that the lights were still on, and I could see a shadow from under the door.

"Someone's in there," I whispered to Sean.

"I see that, but I wonder how long they will be in there. Do you want to try another office?" He was looking around the hall.

"No, this is the one right across from the office. Let's try the roof and see how that sizes up," I said, turning and going toward the stairs.

Just then, the lights went out, and you could hear the door starting

to open. I dove for the door, which was around the left corner of the hallway, but I didn't make it. I lay prone on the floor of the hallway in plain sight of the office we were waiting to get into. Sean was right on the right of the door, which would open outward to the right and probably block anyone seeing him until they went to shut the door, and he would be right there, just like now.

Sean had his revolver out, and he was sticking the barrel into the face of a beautiful young lady who acted like she was going to wet herself. I got up where I was lying and went toward the girl, and I pushed her back into the office. "Don't say a word, and you won't be hurt. Make a sound, and you're dead. Easy as that. Do you understand me?" I tried to be as scary as I could, but now with my pistol in her ear, I don't think she was really listening to me. She nodded, and Sean ran around to find something to tie her up with. There were blinds on the windows, so he went to the far left one and took it down and took the small cord out of the blind and started to tie the girl up.

"What's your name?" I asked for no particular reason.

"Thelma. Thelma Ritter," she answered in a quivering voice.

"What do you do here, Thelma?" I asked again for no reason.

"I'm Mr. Spigarelli's personal assistant," she answered nervously.

"Where is he now?" I demanded in a very stern voice.

"He's over at the Flamingo, probably having dinner with one of his clients or friends."

"In the dining room, what table does he always sit at?" Now I really wanted to know.

"He sits at all the tables. He doesn't have a favorite," she said a little defiantly.

"Now did I tell you that if I caught you lying, I would kill you also? Well, if I didn't, I meant too, and if you lie to me once again, I'll shoot you in the ear," I said, almost spitting the words.

"He usually sits just right of the stage, and he's always against the wall no matter where he sits or wherever he's at." She must have

believed my scary voice because she was offering more than I had asked.

“How long does he usually eat, and what time did he go to dinner? And you better be right on the money with the time,” again, I said in my scariest voice.

“What time is it now?” she inquired. I told her it was now 1913, but she looked at me kind of crazily, so I changed it to 7:13 p.m. She said he had gone at 6:45. He would usually take about thirty minutes to sit down, so he was just about to sit at the table.

“Now think really hard. When he’s sitting at his table, is there ever anyone sitting right across from him at the table?”

“No, he really likes to be seen, so anyone who is dining with him usually is either on his left or right side but never in front of him.” She had a huge amount of information to give, and she sounded as if she didn’t care giving it. I really thought she finally figured out we weren’t going to kill her.

“Sean, why don’t we go down to the main floor and see if one of the offices is open and what view we have to the dining room? Should we take Thelma along or just leave her here tied up?”

“Leave her here, and after we’re done, we can come back and figure out what we are going to do.”

“Thelma, you listen to me. Everything is going to be fine, but you must be quiet and not make a sound. If you do help me before we’re shot, I will come up here and end your life. I’m going to gag you, and when people come to see if you’re all right, you can tell them that we came to kill Spigarelli because he was one of the people who killed John Kennedy.” With that, Thelma’s eyes opened like they were going to pop out of her head.

The windows had drapes attached, so I ripped off a piece at the opposite window we got the blinds. I tore a piece of cloth and tied it across Thelma’s mouth, and we tied her hands and feet together like being hogtied and left her lying on the office floor. Before we went downstairs, I went into Spigarelli’s office and looked out the window.

I took the scope from out of my haversack and held it to my eye and started to scan the third floor for a possible shot, but there were none. This floor wouldn't do anyway, so we came here for no purpose.

We left the office and went left to the stairwell and went down to the main floor. As we came to the door, we opened it rather slowly and listened for any noise that sounded like people in the building. There was none, so Sean opened the door still slowly, and we entered the main floor. After a second to get our bearings, we moved toward the office that would look directly at the Flamingo. It was room 7, which is my lucky number, but for some reason, I didn't feel that lucky tonight. I had taken Thelma's key from her so we could lock her office with her in it, and for some reason, I tried the key in room 7 lock, and it opened.

"Here's the master key. The stupid bastard probably has all the keys in all the offices fit each other. Once we get into the outer office, we will have to crawl to the window of the main office. We just have to take our time and not worry about anything, especially Thelma, because if she gets loose, I'm sure we will hear her," I whispered to Sean.

He nodded, and I opened the door and waited to see if we heard anything inside. Once we felt secure, we moved to the outer office and went to the door to the main office.

"You wait here and keep watch, and I'll go to the window and see if I can get a shot at him," I whispered again to Sean, and he nodded that he understood.

I got on my stomach and started to crawl to the windows that looked out onto the street and the building across from it. As I approached, I could hear people talking from the other side of the wall and also could hear traffic in the street. The blinds were all the way down, and the drapes were closed, which was going to cause a problem, because if anyone were watching this office from across the street, they would see that I raised the blind about two inches and had pulled the drape open about two inches.

I was thinking to myself, *That doesn't sound like much, but if*

someone is hired to just watch this building, they would probably see what I had done. I took the scope and started to look directly into the club from the open front door, and you could see the dining room. There, I could also see Spigarelli just starting to sit for dinner, as clear as day, and it was a perfect sighting. The only problem, and it was a rather large one, was that a huge woman was sitting right in front, not directly but a little to the left, but I didn't have a very clear shot.

I signaled Sean to join me. I left where I was, and I met him at the center of the office. Whispering, I said, "I can see him at dinner. There is this big fat broad sitting in front of him to his left a little, which means I don't have that clear a shot. The window does open, so I can have the barrel of the rifle on the sill and outside the window. I may have to wait until he's finished his meal and goes to get up before I can take my shot. I know we are a day early, but it can't be helped because of Thelma. Are your people around all the time?"

"Don't worry about them. They can adapt quickly. We'll be fine once we get out of here." He really didn't sound that convincing.

As we went back to the window together, I decided that I would recon the area just to see what we had to deal with once this was done. As I looked to the left, I stopped suddenly and almost let out a yelp. I hit Sean on the shoulder so hard that he made a slight noise.

"Look through the scope to the left down the street about twenty-five feet from the entrance and tell me what you see," I said rather nervously.

"Oh, shit" was all he said as he handed the scope back to me after he saw what I saw across the street. The black Cadillac was parked with someone in the driver's seat.

"We can't worry about that. Let's get this done." And I took my haversack off and started to assemble my rifle first, taking the barrel and attaching it to the stock and then the trigger housing that attached to the stock and then placing the scope on top of the barrel. I took out three bullets and placed them on the floor of the office right to my right so it would be easy for me to get the other two. I put a bullet

in the chamber and slid the slide as quietly as I could to make sure it was ready to fire.

The scope that I was using tonight was a new one developed for night firing, and it was attached right where the regular sight was on a rifle. As I looked through the scope again, I could see a part of Spigarelli's head moving up and down as he was eating, and every once in a while, he would stop and take a drink from a wine glass. I also had to be aware of pedestrians walking on the street and people entering the Flamingo. This was going to be a tricky shot, but every time I looked into the scope, I couldn't help thinking about the Cadillac and the man sitting in the driver's seat. It seemed that I was holding the rifle at the window for almost an hour, but I really knew it wasn't that long.

All of a sudden, the fat girl got up and left the table. There he was, right in front of me. I felt no hesitation, no remorse, no second thought of what I was about to do, no thinking of Saigon and Diem. I knew this man was no good, and he killed my president. Just as I said president, I squeezed the trigger, and the sound of the shot was as loud as I could have imagined. I kept the sight right on him as the front of his scalp disappeared.

"Hit. Let's get the fuck out of here." And I was on my feet and starting to run toward the door when the whole front windows were peppered with bullets. It was as if they were waiting for us, and they knew exactly where we were going to set up. As I hit the door, my leg exploded with pain. I looked down, and my trouser leg was covered in blood. I felt kind of queasy, and I thought I was going to pass out. I shouted to Sean, "I'm hit!"

"Where?" He turned and came back to get me. I was starting to fall down on the office floor when he grabbed me and started to pull me up.

"Don't pass out on me, Marine. We need to get to the back door. Do you think you can make it if I carry you?" he was asking me questions, and I was thinking I was going to die.

He picked me up, and we moved toward the office door and the

hallway. We turned left toward the back door and where the car was waiting. Sean was now holding my upper body but was dragging the rest of me down the hallway. We got to the back door and opened it. The car was gone, and bullets started to hit the door. "Holy shit, they're everywhere," I muttered.

"The roof. We must get to the roof!" Sean was screaming.

He put my left arm over his shoulder, and with his right arm, he put his right hand under my right shoulder. We ran back into the hallway, with Sean pulling and dragging me at the same time. We ran down to the end and opened the door to the stairs and started up. It was horrible. Sean was dragging me up the stairs, and with every stair, the pain in my leg was worse. It seemed to take forever to get to the top. We reached the roof and stopped for a second for Sean to catch his breath and for him to get his bearings. Sean picked me up again, and we ran across the roof to the edge. We could see that the buildings were about three to four feet apart.

"Do you think you can jump across?" he asked, but I think he knew the answer.

"Don't know until I try." My leg was now numb, and the blood just kept flowing. There was some cloth laying on the roof, and Sean grabbed it and ripped the bottom off. It made a long six inches wide and four feet long bandage.

"Tie this under the wound, and tie it as tight as you can," he ordered, and I really didn't mind.

I grabbed the cloth, and it went around my leg twice. I pulled it as tight as I could and tied it off. The blood started to slow down, but it didn't stop. He helped me to my feet. Then we walked back about ten feet, and he let go of me.

"When you get to the other side, roll and don't try to land on your feet," again, he ordered.

I stood, looking at the end of the roof, and then I took a deep breath and started to move. I was limping really badly, but I was determined to give it the best I could. Even if I were short, I think I could grab the

other buildings roof, and when Sean jumped, he could help me pull myself up. I thought I was really moving fast, but as I came to the end of the roof, it didn't seem that fast. But I jumped as hard as I could, and I didn't look down. It seemed that I was floating through the air for minutes, but I knew deep down it was a second or two. Then I hit the other side, and I rolled as Sean told me too. My leg exploded with pain, and I let out a scream, which was possibly the worst thing I could have done because this told the bad guys where we were.

There were two more buildings we needed to jump too, so we did this routine two more times, and as we ran, we could hear the commotion from the street. Sirens were coming into the district, so the police had been summoned. But I was thinking of the people who fired into the window right after the shooting. We got to the final building, and I rolled the last time, and again, I let out an ugly scream. With that, bullets started to fly our way.

Sean was right behind me, and as he landed and rolled, he shot up, quickly picked me up, and dragged me to a spot behind an electrical box. Bullets were hitting the front of the box, but they could not penetrate. I had a weapon, and because the bad guys were that close and with the power of a sniper rifle, my bullets would go through the metal they were hiding behind.

"Do you see them? How many are there?" I asked Sean while trying to stand up.

"I think there are only two or maybe three of them. They are right behind that metal wall over there by the exit door. Can you see them yet?"

"I can see a silhouette on the right of the box. Now, if I'm right, this bullet should go right through both walls of the box and hit the shooter on the right." As I said that, I was raising my rifle to try to get a shot. The night scope was still on the rifle, so it made this a little easier. I sighted in, but the sweat from my brow was coming down into my eyes and was burning them so badly that I was blinking and squinting all the time. A sniper should never be blind because it will affect the

shot, so I took my sleeve and wiped away the sweat. I sighted in once again, and then I started to squeeze the trigger. The explosion from the rifle could have been heard in New Orleans or at least that was what it sounded like to me. I was still looking through the scope when I saw my target fall to the right of the box.

“One down and two to go!” I yelled to Sean as I started to sight in on the second shooter. I guessed he figured I got a stronger gun than he had because he decided to get a better position on the roof than he had now, and he started to run. I led him about an inch and started to squeeze the trigger once again. With the explosion, he went down very quickly, but I didn’t think I killed him because he was starting to dive for position when the bullet hit him. “He’s not dead, but I don’t think he’s going to be shooting at us any time soon!” I yelled to Sean. “Do you see any other shooters up here?”

“No, but stay put. I’ll go over to the last hit and see if there are any more around.” With that, Sean started to crawl toward the last victim who was hit. I saw him stand up and go around the box, but then I lost sight of him. As I was waiting, I heard a very familiar sound. It was the sound of a .45-caliber pistol. I saw Sean come back around the box and head toward me. As he approached, he said, “I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to shoot at us anytime soon.”

Sean picked me up like before, and we went to the stairwell and went down to the lobby, with him taking three steps at a time and dragging me with him. As we got to the bottom, he propped me on the bottom stair and went to open the door. He peered around the corner and saw the hallway was empty. He left me there and started to run down the hall to the back door. The door to the hallway closed, and I was alone. I took out my sidearm and waited for the shots, but there was nothing. I could hear some running, and it was coming close to me.

I propped myself up on the side wall and pointed my .45 toward the door. As the door opened, I was about to shoot when I heard Sean yell something, and then he leaned down and pulled me up. We started

down the hallway, and this time, I had my sidearm in my right hand and my Remington slung over my back on top of the haversack. As we got to the back door and right before Sean opened it, I heard this very loud noise and felt this terrible sharp pain in my thigh.

“Sean, my leg is killing me.” I believed I passed out for a second.

Sean was asking over and over, “Can you make it to the car?” With that, he picked me up again and kicked open the door. There was the car, and it was the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in a long time—even better than Brigitte Bardot.

He pushed me at the back, and he jumped into the driver’s seat. I would swear the car was running, but I wasn’t feeling very well. My leg hurt like hell, and I could feel something really warm running down my leg. Sean floored the car, and we spun out onto the main street and toward Highway 10 and safety. As we raised through Wooddale Blvd., I could see the Cadillac right behind us. Sean took a left on Tom Drive to N. Lobdell Blvd. and took a right. We needed to get to South River Road and, from there, to Highway 10 or Route 18, whichever looked good. As we raced down N. Lobdell Blvd., the Cadillac started to gain on us, and from the front seat, Sean yelled to me, “Can you take him out?”

I’d never fired from a moving car, but my rifle was still in one piece because I hadn’t had time to break it down. I didn’t have the other two bullets because I forgot to pick them up in all the commotion. I still had a whole box of cartridges in my haversack, so I put one in the chamber and pulled back the slide. I banged the rear window out with the bottom of the stock of the rifle. It took me about three blows to get the whole window out.

I placed the barrel on the open window and started to sight in. We were going so fast, and the bumps were too many for me to make a very clean shot. I sighted in and squeezed a round off, and it missed. I think this was the first miss I had ever made while shooting a rifle. I put another round in the chamber, pulled the slide back, and it snapped in. I took aim again and fired, and I missed again.

“Sean, slow down as much as you can to stop the bouncing. Let him come as close, then I’ll get him.”

“I think you’re crazy, but I don’t have any more options.” And he started to slow down. However, he didn’t use the brakes, so he didn’t show the Cadillac that we were up to something. I took out another round, put it in the rifle, snapped the slide, and aimed at the right front window—dead center. I felt the jolt as the round left the barrel, and it hit the window. The Cadillac suddenly geared to the left and started to flip over and over. The last I saw of the Cadillac, it had come to a rest. The top of the car was flat, and it suddenly burst into flames. Sean stepped on the gas and flew down the boulevard until we came to the junction of Highway 10 and Route 18.

“Anyone behind us that’s chasing?” Sean asked as he started to slow down again. “What road do you want to take? I need to look at your leg soon and see if I can help you.”

“I don’t think so. I think the Cadillac was the only one following us, and my leg has gone numb, so it should be all right for a while. I think it’s stopped bleeding.” It hadn’t, but I didn’t want to take a chance on being caught.

We flew down Highway 10 and past New Orleans and into the night. My leg was really starting to hurt, but we kept on going onto Interstate 59N through Mississippi and into Alabama. Still on I59N, we were heading toward Chattanooga, but right outside of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Sean decided that we needed gas. He said he would take a look at my leg and see if he could help with the pain. As we entered the gas station, an attendant came out. Sean told him to fill it up and check under the hood, and if oil was needed, just to put whatever was needed.

As we were walking toward the men’s room, I noticed two doors. The first one was marked Whites Only, and the other was marked Colored Only. But I was in so much pain that I didn’t give it a thought. As we were just about to go into the bathroom, the attendant yelled out to Sean, “Do you know you have bullet holes at the back of your car?”

Sean, without a breath, yelled back, "They're not bullet holes but holes made from giant mosquitos in New Orleans." He turned and laughed all the way into the bathroom.

Once inside, I dropped my trousers and lifted my shorts so he could see how bad it was. After a few *hums* and *ahs*, he finally made a comment, "Not that bad. You've lost some blood, but the bullet went into the fatty part of your thigh. Bad news is that it's still in there, and that's why it's still hurting like hell. I don't have the tools or the knowledge to try to get it out. We should be in Washington tomorrow afternoon if we drive straight through, and if you think you can hold on, I'd rather wait. I'll get you a bunch of aspirins to try to kill the pain, along with some whiskey and bandages. You just keep your eyes out for any sign of trouble. I don't think we've been followed, but with these guys and who they know from around here, you never know."

He went into the store that was attached to the gas station and bought some aspirins, bandages, and two bottles of Kentucky's finest bourbon, Jack Daniels. Back on the highway, we got onto I-24E as we entered Tennessee and continued until we hit I-40E through Virginia and into the outskirts of Washington, DC. Just before we entered DC, he stopped and made a phone call to the commander.

"We are heading for Bethesda. The commander will meet us there, and they will take the bullet out of your leg. How are you feeling?" Sean asked with a lot of concern in his voice.

"Just about killed one of these bottles, so I really can't feel my leg or any other part of my body," I said, laughing hysterically for no reason at all.

As we pulled up to the emergency entrance to the Bethesda Naval Hospital, the commander was standing at the entrance in full uniform, which I haven't seen him wearing since I met him back at Headquarters Marine Corps. As we approached, he yelled something at an orderly. A wheelchair appeared, and they helped me into it.

"How are you feeling, Jim? What the hell happened?" At least he asked how I was first.

"It hurts when I don't drink, but Sean has taken care of that."

"How many drinks has he had?" again, he sounded not that concerned with my health.

"Not drinks but bottles. He just finished off a quart of Jack Daniels, so he hasn't complained for the past one hundred miles or so."

"After we get him patched up, we will have you debrief. What the hell went wrong, and why were you a day ahead of schedule?" I could hear him as the attendants were wheeling me into a surgical room.

As the attendants put me on the operating table, a nurse came in and asked if there was anything she could get me or anything she could do for me. Her name was Veronica White. I was hoping I didn't smirk because this definitely was not the place for flirting, and also, she was a Navy lieutenant and in the military, especially in the Navy Department. Officers and enlisted personnel just don't mix. It is a court-martial offense for both to date. If caught, the officer will be kicked out of their branch of the service, and the enlisted person is subject to court-martial and jail time and also kicked out of their branch of service. The amazing thing about all this is that it happens a lot. Most of the time, heads are turned, and people are never get caught.

"Where are you from, Lieutenant?" It was a proper question for a lieutenant.

"Natick, Massachusetts. Have you ever heard of it? Really small town."

"I'm from Hingham. Not too far from Natick. I remember they always had good sports teams," I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, they were very good. I didn't go to Natick High School but went to a private school called the Walnut Hill School. From there, I went to Wellesley College for a semester, but then I decided I wanted to be a nurse and transferred to Catherine Laboure in Milton. What about you? Where did you go to school?"

"I went to Hingham High School and then started at Boston

College. But I really wasn't ready to continue school, so I worked for a year and then joined the Marines."

"Do you like the Marine?"

"I love it. Probably will make it a career, or at least right now, I feel that way.

"What is your MOS, and why is a Navy commander so interested in you?" She seemed quite interested, but my antennae went up. I started to wonder why all the particular questions about what I did and who was the commander. I decided to try to change the subject.

"Oh, he's nothing but a personal friend of my family. Are you seeing anyone right now? I know this is a little presumptuous of me and I know the rules of the Navy, but if I gave you a call sometime, maybe we could go out to dinner? What do you say?"

"I like dinner, and I have never followed the rules of anything if I thought it was good for me. If you want to get in touch with me, the best way is to call the hospital. They will connect us. I would love to go out with you."

Just then, the surgeon came in and introduced himself as Commander Valenzuela and said that he was going to take care of me that evening. He said after looking at the x-rays (what x-rays I must have had more to drink than I thought) that there were no bones broken and no arteries or life-threatening items to worry about.

"How did you do this, Marine?" the doctor asked out of curiosity.

"I was cleaning my rifle, and it went off," I answered without thinking.

"This is an old wound. When did you shoot yourself?" again, he was asking questions he shouldn't.

"A couple of days ago. I was hunting in the woods, and it took me all this time to find my way out and here to the hospital. Can we stop all the questions, sir, and get on with easing the pain?"

I was in the operating room for about an hour when the doctor said he was finished. He said he got the bullet out and cleaned and

stitched the wound, and he said that I should spend at least one night in the hospital so he could make sure I was all right.

“Commander, I’m going to keep the corporal overnight. I just want to keep an eye on him. He should be all set by noon tomorrow,” Lieutenant White said.

“Do you think that’s really necessary? You know these hunters. They want to get back to the woods as soon as possible,” he said with a straight face.

“I’d really feel much better if he stayed at least tonight. I would rather have him stay a couple of nights. But I don’t think I could talk him into that, so I’ll take one night.”

“Okay then, Lieutenant, but what about his bandages and such?”

“Well, he knows that if anything should go wrong with the dressing or other things, he knows where I’m at.”

“Jim, I’m off now, and I won’t be here till tomorrow evening. So you take care of yourself, and please be careful in the future cleaning your weapon.” She smiled a smile I had never seen before. What the hell did she mean by that comment? She looked around and then leaned over and kissed me on the cheek and whispered, “I’ll be here for another six months, and then I’m going to transfer closer to home. Try to keep in touch.” And then she turned and walked back into the emergency area.

“Jim, you know the rules, but I’m not going to tell how you should act. She’s a beautiful girl, but she’s an officer and you’re not. Maybe in the future we can rectify that.”

The commander and Sean were still just standing around my bed, and as we were waiting, I couldn’t take my mind off the lieutenant and how pretty she was. With what she said, did it mean anything, or was she just flirting? I didn’t even know how to get in touch with her. Maybe I’d ask the commander if he could find out some information for me about her. I’d ask him tomorrow right before the debriefing because it was going to be a long one with all the laughing and smiling tonight. I knew that the commander was upset as hell with whatever

we did or didn't do, and we were going to hear about it.

The next morning, Sean picked me up at 1100 hours, and we left Bethesda and got on Wilson Lane. Sean was driving a brand-new Chevrolet Malibu, which was blue and white. I found out after leaving Baton Rouge that it could really fly, but it had some bullet holes at the back trunk and the rear window was blown out. We were heading toward the interstate to go to Langley.

"That lieutenant is really good looking," Sean said out of the blue.

"She's from Natick, Massachusetts, which is not too far from where I grew up."

"What's her story? Is she just in for the short or long run?"

"She said she'd like to make a career of the Navy."

"Not looking like she won't. Someone will snap that up right away. She's too good looking to be a lifer," he sounded, for once, like an expert.

"Do you think I've got a chance with that?" I looked directly at him, with hope in my eyes.

"I don't know, Jim. It won't be easy as she's an officer and a nurse at that, and you're a Marine corporal or just an enlisted man. Have you ever thought of becoming an officer? The commander has pull, and he could get you in a program. You could go to Bethesda College to prepare for the Naval Academy. What do you think?"

"Sean, I hate school, and I hate authority. I love the Marine Corps, and I know that doesn't make much sense, but that's the way I feel. Sometimes when he tells me to do something, I do everything in my power not to tell him to go fuck himself. Nothing against him, but this is the way I'm made. I love what I'm doing, and I'm good at it. I hope I can continue doing this for the rest of my days in the Marines. Sometimes I have dreams of what we did in Saigon, but I wasn't really ready for what happened. Baton Rouge seemed a lot easier. If I thought I had a chance with Veronica, I wouldn't have left Bethesda and stayed there into the night to see her. But even for her, the Naval Academy

isn't for me. When I was in boot camp, they had me interviewed for flight school at Pensacola, but I couldn't pass the physical because I can't see up close. I get a laugh every time I think of flunking the physical when I joined the Marines because of an eye test and what I'm doing now. Amazing!"

As we were talking, we were exiting off I95 to Rte and 193 in McLean, Virginia, and only a few miles from Langley—the home of the Central Intelligence Agency. As we pulled up to the front door, Sean took out a badge and handed it to me. It wasn't marked Visitor like most badges. This one had Paramilitary Officer, Special Activities Division, and I put it on as did Sean with his badge, which said the same thing.

As we entered the headquarters building, people were scurrying around the main hallway, going this way and that and always going into offices through the same-colored doors. There had to be a hundred of them just on the main floor. As we were walking toward the elevator, we passed the memorial wall that was on the north wall in the lobby. There were stars carved into the white Alabama marble wall, with each star representing a CIA employee who died in the line of service mostly from the paramilitary of the CIA's Special Activities Division.

"If I die from what I'm doing, will my name go up on the wall?" I asked Sean as I looked at some of the names.

"We don't talk like that around here, Jim. But no, your name won't appear here, or probably, it won't appear anywhere because no one will know what you did. You'll just pass without notice."

This was definitely not what I really wanted to hear. We got into the elevator and rode up to the third floor, and when it stopped, we turned left. There were more doors, all the same for yards and yards.

"I definitely couldn't work in this building. I'd take about three hours a day to figure out what door I was supposed to go in. Are all the floors like these?" I looked around and then at Sean.

"Every floor is the same. A very structured place."

We entered the office and spoke to the secretary. She escorted us

into the conference room, and we took our seats. The commander came in about two minutes later and asked if we wanted anything to drink or eat, but neither one of us was that comfortable. All I wanted was to get this over with as soon as possible.

The commander started first, "What the hell happened in Baton Rouge?" he asked directly and without hesitation.

"We got the job done. That's what happened there. The plans were interrupted when we were looking over the office building across from the Flamingo, and we walked right into a secretary. Couldn't be helped. She came out of the office before we had time to hide. We eliminated the problem and proceeded in taking out the target."

"What do you mean you eliminated the problem? Did you kill her?" He was on the edge of his chair, and his face was getting beet red.

"No, we tied her up and gaged her, and then we scouted out the best place for the mission to continue," I said with as little passion that I could muster.

"She saw both your faces, and you didn't kill her. Are you two fucking crazy? I can see Jim not doing it because he really doesn't know the protocols for this scenario. But, Sean, you are well aware that we do not leave witnesses around to identify any of us!" now he was yelling.

"Why in God's name would we kill her? She had nothing to do with JFK. She's a \$2.65 an hour secretary who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. What the hell would you call killing her?" now I was yelling as loud as he was.

"I'd call it collateral damage, and I would say it was justified. Now we have to worry that she can identify you and Sean. Did either of you use your real names?" He was so red I thought he would explode.

"Okay, Commander. Let's get one thing straight, and there is no bargaining on this point. I don't just kill anyone. No collateral damage, no wrong place wrong time, no nothing. I will kill whom you tell me to, but I will not just kill a young girl of about eighteen years old because she worked late at night and works for some scum ball who I've been sent to blow his fucking head off. Is that understood? If we

cannot come to an agreement on this issue, I'm done. I'll go back to the regular Marine Corps, and you won't hear from me again."

"Calm down. But I want to tell you this one more time. This is the last time I will mention it, and it better never happen again. Do not, under any circumstance, tell me you're not going to do something when I tell you to. I am giving you a direct order, and if you refuse, I can have you shot or at least spend a lot of time in a federal prison. Is that understood? I am the boss, and in this man's service, rank definitely does have its privileges." He sat back down in his seat but not seeming to be upset.

We sat in that room for about another hour, going over the big question continually repeated—and that was the question of the girl Thelma Ritter and how much did she know. Did she get your names? Did she get a really good look at you? How close was she to Spigarelli? What did she tell you? All the questions in which we really didn't have answers for. Now as this went on, Sean and I were getting a little upset, and finally, we both came out at the same time with close to the same question. "Why don't you get your people to find out what she told the police? If she gave a description of what we looked and sounded like, then you know she isn't part of the mob, but if she gave the police nothing, then it's a good guess she has told someone."

I also said to the commander that he should check to see if she was even still around. Sean's biggest concern about this whole thing was why and how did Spigarelli's men react so quickly to what happened, unless someone had told them in advance that we were coming the next day. No one knew we were going to hit him that night, not even us. The girl's presence was the cause for us to change our plans.

The commander turned this right around and said that these were Sean's people, and he should know who he could trust and whom he couldn't. Sean came back and said that he got most of the people from his CIA contact in New Orleans by the name of Charles Musselman, who was recommended by the commander's office. That subject was dropped immediately. After all this time, it was decided or the

commander ordered us to come back in the morning around 1000 hours right after breakfast.

There was a motel right across the road from the CIA Headquarters, and we were put up there for the evening. We got to the motel around 0100, and after getting the key and going to my room, I fell on the bed, still in my cloths. I fell dead asleep until the telephone rang. It was Sean wanting to know if I wanted to go to breakfast. I told him I needed to make a quick call, and I would meet him in the restaurant. I hung up the phone, got my wallet, and looked for a number that I had gotten the previous evening. I sat down and started to dial but hung up before it started to ring. I kept thinking of the problems this call would make, even if it was worth it. I picked up the receiver again and dialed the number again, and this time, I heard the phone ringing. "Hello, this is Lieutenant White."

"Hi, this is Jim Coleman. We met last night in the hospital." I was nervous as hell, but she had the voice of an angel.

"Hi, Jim. How are you feeling? Did you get any sleep last night after you left here?" she sounded concerned.

"We stopped at a motel, and to be honest, I just awoke up about thirty minutes ago. I know you said last night to give you a call, and I really don't know when I will be back in town. So I thought I'd call, and I'm kind of rambling now," I said. My voice was shaking like crazy.

"Are you being transferred, or are you going TDY someplace else?"

"I'll probably be either at Headquarters Marine Corps on 8th & I, or I'll be stationed at Quantico, which isn't that far from Bethesda."

"That would be great. I have to go on duty in about five minutes, so when you find out where you'll be, call me. We will get together. Is that all right with you?"

"That sounds great to me, but I don't know if you know this. I'm an enlisted man in the Marines," I said, waiting for the phone to go dead.

"I'm well aware of that fact and if it doesn't bother me I can't see why it would bother you." Wow, that's not what I expected to here.

"Veronica, I will call you as soon as I get settled."

"Jim, my friends call me Ronnie."

"Okay, Ronnie. I will call you as soon as possible. Have a good shift. Goodbye." And I hung the phone up, and I was smiling all the time— from the shower and all the way to the dining room and breakfast.

"What's with you? What are you so happy about?"

"I'm not. Well, yes I'm very happy. Remember that nurse from last night? The one that was flirting with me?"

"Yes, the lieutenant, and I didn't think she was flirting with you. She was only being nice."

"What the hell do you know? You're Irish. Well, I just hung up from her, and when I get to either Quantico or DC, we are going to go out on a date. That's what you know about women," I said, still smiling.

"Well, I wouldn't make any dinner plans soon. Remember, we still got one more shooter on the JFK case, and he's nowhere near here." It killed my mood instantly.

"But I thought he was in that special prison on the island away from Cuba. How are we supposed to take him out if he's in a prison that he can't get out of and we can't get into? Seems a little impossible if you ask me."

"But in this case, no one is asking you or even me. We go where we're told to go and not to ask any questions." The rest of the breakfast was done in silence or just about, except for the requests of passing the salt or butter.

We finished and got in Sean's car and drove across the street, and we parked in the employee parking lot. I still had my badge in my pocket, and I took it out and pinned it to my collar. As we entered, thousands of people were running around and going into this door or that door. It looked like one of those cartoons where they speed everything up, and it was very amusing.

We went to the reception desk and told the young lady behind the counter that we had an appointment with the commander, and we gave our names. She asked for us to take a seat, and it would be a few minutes before someone would come and get us. We thanked her and turned and walked over to a very large sofa that was in the lobby, opposite the reception desk. About five minutes later, the commander came down the hall and walked over to us and shook both our hands and escorted us to his office.

"Coffee, tea, breakfast?" he asked as we entered the outer office. Again, there was a very attractive girl sitting behind the desk in the middle of the room, against the back wall.

"No, thanks. We just had breakfast at the motel, but I could go for some coffee, please."

The girl looked up, and without any kind of emotion on her face, she asked, "Would you like anything with that?"

"Cream and sugar, please."

"I know that, but what I meant was a donut, muffin, or even a bagel?" She looked a little put out by my answer.

"No thank you. Just coffee. You want tea, Sean?"

"No, I'm good." He was looking at the girl over and was smiling.

"Let's go into the conference room and continue from last night," he said, pointing to a particular door. We sat down, and he didn't waste any time getting right into it.

"Seems the girl called in this morning or late last night and quit. One of our people went by her house to see if there were any strange cars out front, and there was one. But when they thought our guy was someone they didn't want to see, they left. Our guy went to investigate the house from the back door, and it seems Thelma has left the city. So it seems right now, we don't need to worry about her or what she could or would say about the other night. I also got the medical report of Spigarelli, and it seems he died of a single shot rifle bullet, caliber 7.62 military grade by a single shot that entered through his right eye

and out the back of his head. He died instantly.

“The police found two male bodies on the roof of one of the buildings across the street, and they died again by a single shot to each chest through a metal door by a 7.62 military grade bullet. The police also said that they found a 1962 black Cadillac turned over and burning with four males still in the vehicle, all dead. The driver was killed by a single 7.62 military grade bullet that went through the driver’s front window and into the driver’s nose. The coroner surmises that the other three were killed on impact when the car flipped over and landed on the roof where it collapsed. The only report the police could get of the shooters was that they fled in a white Plymouth Fury, but they couldn’t get a license number. They know it was heading east out of the city and onto Highway 10. Oh, there’s one more thing they know about one of the shooters. He was wounded.” By the last statement, he didn’t seem too happy.

“But we didn’t stop at any hospital near there, and we got gas in Alabama, which is really far away from Baton Rouge,” Sean chimed in, trying to deflect the onslaught of profanity that he knew was coming my way.

“I really don’t understand how you got shot, Jim.”

“Well, damn it. I didn’t do it on purpose. As we tried to explain last night, when I fired the round, within seconds, bullets were flying out way. I got hit when we were exiting the room, and one must have come through the wall and got me in the thigh. I must have been seen by someone as Sean was putting me at the back seat of the car. I just like to know how they react so fast unless they knew we were coming, but they couldn’t know for that night. We didn’t know we were to go until we ran into Thelma, and all our plans changed instantly. That’s it, Commander. You can go over everything over and over again, but that’s the whole story. Bottom line is that seven gangsters are dead, and we were only there a few days.”

“That’s not the point, but I must say you did a terrific job. But you must be more careful when these things are coming down. You can’t

freelance. What I mean by that is that you have to follow protocol, and it can't change because you have so many people looking out for you."

"Well, if that's the case, where the hell were they on that night in Baton Rouge? We were two against the world, and we didn't see or hear any help during all that shit that was coming down." Sean was now getting a little upset. When he said "shit," it came out in his Irish accent like "kite" but with an "sh," and it was so funny.

"Okay, New Orleans is done, and we must move on to other things. Sean, I have you leaving for Cuba in two days out of Lakehurst Naval Air Station in Toms River, New Jersey, and you'll be stationed in Havana. You will meet up with a local name is Umberto Rodriguez, who was part of Castro's army when they were fighting for their freedom, got disillusioned when Castro took control. He has worked with us for almost four years and is very dependable. Jim, you're going to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina for Recon training, and you'll be with them for three months. Then you'll be transferred to Guantanamo Bay, and you'll get your orders after you arrive there." He then asked if we had any questions, and I guess I had a quizzical look on my face. He asked what I was thinking about.

"First, I'd like to know what's going to happen to the girl in the office, Thelma Ritter. Is she going to be all right? Do you think they will be looking for her? Do you think Spigarelli's people are going to be looking for us?"

"Well, speaking of Thelma Ritter, she's moved back to Iowa with her parents. I really don't believe she knew anything worthwhile, so no, I really don't see them going after her. She says she doesn't know what you two looked like because it was dark. And you came up behind her, so she said she never saw your faces. She did say that Sean had an accent like a German, but I don't know if she was just trying to throw everyone off the case or that she is really that dumb. Hopefully, it's the first one. I really don't see Spigarelli's people coming after you two. Remember, he was a low fish in the Chicago Mafia's big pond, but he was hiding out in Baton Rouge under the protection of the

New Orleans's crime family under the direction of Carlos Marcello, who also could have been a part of the Kennedy assassination. But Spigarelli was Giancana's underboss, but it doesn't look as if Sam is that concerned with Spigarelli's death as long as the hit didn't come from another crime family. Plus, it would take them forever to find you two."

We finished up some small problems and questions, and then we were dismissed. Sean was going to drive me to my car, which was still in Washington, so we said our goodbyes to the commander and then headed out. We took I95 all the way to DC, and Sean dropped me off at the gate of Headquarters Marine Corps. I had my orders to TDY in Washington for twenty-four hours, and I was hoping that I could see Ronnie before I would leave for North Carolina.

As I entered the main building, I could see an E-5 (sergeant) sitting at the desk with an MP arm band on his right sleeve. As I approached, he looked up and then looked back down to his paperwork.

"Excuse me, Sergeant. I'm Cpl. James Coleman, and I'm TDY here for the evening. I have my orders here, and I've been told that I will pick up my permanent orders in the morning. Can you help with this?" He never looked up as I spoke.

"Who says you're only going to be here one day? This place doesn't move that fast." Still he was not looking up.

"I know what you mean. I've been here before. Can you point to a room or a squad bay that I can get some sleep? It's been a long day," I asked very pleasantly, even though he still not looked up.

"Go down this hallway, and when you come to no. 6, that's the room you can have for the evening. And, Jim, welcome back to headquarters."

As he looked up, I almost fell over. Sitting there was FX Maddox, the recruit I helped qualify on the rifle range. Now he was a sergeant, and I was still a corporal.

After getting my composure back and shaking my hands over and over, I finally had to ask, "What the hell are you doing here? And a sergeant?"

"I'm the Staff NCO for the account department here, and I just got promoted. When I left Parris Island and Lejeune, I was geared for the grunts, 0300, but you know I fire a rifle, so I started looking into the MOS that I thought I could fill. I noticed there was one for a financial management resource analyst, 3451. I went back to school for a while to learn how to do this stuff, Bethesda College, and I got stationed here about nine months ago. What the hell have you been doing with yourself? Married yet? I got married and have a little girl, six months."

"Well, I've been here and there. Lots of TDYs. I've been testing all sorts of rifles for the Corps and traveling a lot with the rifle team in Quantico, but I'm on my way to Lejeune to become a Recon Marine. Not married, but I met this girl the other day in Washington. Now I'm going to North Carolina, and I guess that's out."

"Hey, Lejeune is only six hours away or five hundred plus miles. I was TDY a couple of months ago, and I would come to Washington every weekend to see my wife and new daughter. Where does she work? Is she in the Corps?"

"She works in some medical business in Bethesda, right near the hospital. I just met her the other day, so I really don't know that much about her or even if she has a boyfriend. I really don't want to get too serious with what may happen in the world, meaning Vietnam or Cuba. Even the Russians are starting to rattle their sabers again, so I can't get that serious with anyone. Now where is that room? I'm really exhausted. We should catch up before I leave for Lejeune. Goodnight."

I started walking toward the room, and I really didn't want to get into what I've been doing because trying to keep these lies straight was starting to get to me. The room was small with a bunk, desk, light, and a closet—a typical military issue but would suffice for the evening.

The next morning, I got up at 0530 and went for a run around the inside of the base. When I returned, there was a note on the door telling me to report to the commanding officer at 0830, and then I was to call the commander. I showered and got into my tropical uniform and went to breakfast. Then I got back to my room, packed the rest of

stuff in my seabag, and took all my stuff out to my car, which hadn't been driven in months. It was parked in the holding lot, and I put everything in there and started walking back to the CO's office.

It was 0815 when I reported to the staff sergeant on the desk. He told me it would be a while, my thirty minutes, until the CO would see me. He was wrong because within two minutes, the door to the CO's office opened, and I was summoned into his office by a very pretty lieutenant. I walked straight into the office and marched right up to the front of his desk and said, "Corporal James Coleman, reporting as ordered, sir." There was no salute because Marines do not salute indoors.

"At ease, Corporal. Isadore Malcolm and I are in charge of Headquarters and Service Battalion here in Washington. I have here your transfer orders to Camp Lejeune, but before I sign them, I just want to ask you a few questions and give you something. First, what the hell have you been doing these past few months?"

"I don't know what you're referring to, Colonel?"

"I've been reading your record, and you've been all over the place these past six months. There are no locations, no permanent bases, but you've been TDY for months. Can you explain that to me, Corporal?" He was agitated, but he wasn't far from it.

"All I can say, Colonel, is that you would have to contact Cmdr. Forrest Damon and ask him, sir. He has been my commanding officer since I've been on TDY." I believed this would suffice as an answer.

"Corporal, I'm not talking to the commander or anyone else, I'm talking to you, and I want an answer. And as a colonel in the Marine Corps and you are a marine, you better damn well start answering my questions."

"I understand that, sir, but I must respectfully deny an answer at this time until you speak with the commander." As I finished that sentence, I just knew the rest of this conversation was not going to go well.

"You're being insubordinate, and I could have you thrown into the

brig, Corporal." He was getting a little red.

"I know you can, Colonel, and if that's what you have to do, then I say do it. But for the time being, sir, and with all due respect, I have nothing more to say." I waited for him to call the MPs.

"Very well, Corporal. I have here your promotion to E-5 (sergeant), but I don't think I'm going to present this to you at this time. I will give that honor to your commanding officer in Lejeune. Here are your orders, and you are dismissed. One word of advice to you, Corporal. When a senior officer asks you a question in the future, you better damn well tell him what he asks for, or you'll be nothing but a brig rat for the rest of your time in this man's Marine Corps. Now get out of here." He handed me my orders and spun around in his chair so his back was to me.

Snapping to attention, I said, "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." And I spun around and marched right out of his office. I thought I'd call the commander and put him on alert, but I thought I'd wait until I got to Lejeune because I didn't think I could put up with him and all his damn questions.

As I sat in my car, I decided to open my orders to see where I was going and to whom would I report to. It was Friday morning, and I had three days to get to Camp Lejeune, as I was to report to the commanding officer, third Battalion, eighth Marine Regiment. It sounded like a great unit, and I knew they would get me in tip-top shape. Also, I knew I'd be able to help them with my shooting.

Starting up the car, I decided to follow Constitution Ave. NW to get to I-395 S, heading toward Richmond, Virginia, which was only about twelve miles. Then I would get on I-95 S just outside of Richmond, and I would follow I-95 for the next 225 miles through Emporia and Rocky Mount on the border of North Carolina. Then I took US-264 and I 795 S toward Goldsboro and Raleigh/Wilson, North Carolina. After taking exit 119A onto US-264 S toward Wilson/Greenville and Goldsboro, North Carolina, I merged onto US-70 E toward Kinston, North Carolina and then US Highway 258 S to the

Wilmington Highway all the way to Rhodes Point Road and Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It only took me ten hours from Washington, DC.

Now I have two complete days to look around Jacksonville, North Carolina, the city that Camp Lejeune is located in. There were a number of motels around the base, and I checked into one and then went to get something to eat. After eating, I came back to the motel and put a call into the commander, but he wasn't in his office. So I left a message for him to call me, and I left the phone number of the motel. I was really tired, so I decided to take a nap, and then I was going to go out into the night and see what was going on for a Saturday evening.

Just as I got to sleep, the phone rang, and it was the commander. But he really wasn't in the mood to talk. I told him about the CO at Headquarters Marine Corps, Colonel Malcolm, but the commander really didn't sound that concerned. He said he'd look into it, but I wasn't to worry about these things. He said that being on TDY that many times would cause some flags to go up, and I always had officers interested in what I was doing. He told me to give him a call in about a month to tell me how the training was going.

I guessed when you weren't working for the commander, he really didn't care about what was going on. I spent the next two days just driving around Jacksonville and Wilmington just to see what kind of cities they were. Nothing out of the ordinary, but they were very small compared to the cities in the northeast such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

I rose early on Monday morning and dressed in my tropical uniform, which I had cleaned at this little cleaners right off the base that was advertised in their window: Uniforms cleaned within two hours. I had shined my uniform shoes, and I even got a haircut while waiting for my uniform. I still wear my hair the same way I wore it in high school, a flat top with the sides cut extremely close. I checked out of the motel right after I had breakfast and then drove to the entrance of the base.

Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune was built in 1941 on a 11,000-acre tract in Onslow County, and it supplemented into three facilities—the main base that is the home to the Second Marine Division, Marine Corps Air Station New River, and Camp Geiger, which is the Marine Corps School of Infantry East home where all Marines recruited through the Eastern Recruiting Region and where I finished my training after graduating from Parris Island. Camp Lejeune was named in honor of the thirteenth commandant of the Marine Corps, John A. Lejeune. Camp Lejeune is the fourth largest base in the United States, and that being that the Marine Corps is the smallest of all the major services in the US. I got directions at the main gate for the CO of Third Battalion, and I drove to the base for the first time and made a couple of lefts and rights.

Finally, here I was at the headquarters of the Third Battalion, Eighth Marines, a light infantry battalion consisting of about a thousand marines and sailors (corpsmen), which are part of the Second Marine Division. I parked my car in the visitors space, took my orders of the seat, straightened my cover, and started to walk to the main door. I hoped for a new chapter of my life in the Marine Corps.

I went to the counter on the other side of the door and told the corporal standing there that I was reporting from Headquarters Marine Corps to the Third Battalion for duty. He took my orders, told me to take a seat, and then took the orders and entered the only office door in the building. I took my seat, and I just got comfortable when he came back and told me that Lt. Col. Roger Spaulding was ready to see me. I walked between two desks and went directly to the entrance of the office.

“Cpl. James Coleman reporting for duty!” I almost screamed it out.

“Center yourself at the front of the desk, Corporal,” Lieutenant Colonel answered, still sitting.

As I centered myself at the desk, he stood up and stuck his hand out, and I shook it with enthusiasm. Colonel Spaulding was about my height, six feet, and probably weighed about the same as me, 165

pounds. But he was much older than me, approximately forty-two years old. He had a great smile, and he had a slight southern accent, which he probably got from being based in North Carolina. After shaking hands, he instructed me to take a seat in one of the two chairs that were at the sides of his desk. As I sat, he opened my orders and started to read them, but halfway through, he put them down on his desk.

“Why us, Jim? Why have you come to the Third Battalion? It says here that you’ve been on TDY for almost two years, but why is classified. Can you elaborate any information for me?” he asked with direction but not intimidation.

“What would you like to know, sir? I will tell you as much as I can, but as you just said, most is classified. I can tell you that I graduated from Parris Island, and I shot expert on the range. Last year, I had to requalify, and I shot expert again. I’ve made PFC out of boot camp and then was promoted rather quickly to my current rank,” I tried to explain the basics and not get into where, when, how, or what I’d been doing exactly for the past years.

“Speaking of promotions, I have in these orders a directive that you are to receive a promotion to E-5 (sergeant) effective immediately. Some of the fellows in the barracks will tell you where to get the new chevrons sewn on as soon as possible or within the day’s end. I will have my corporal give you the location of the marine store so you can get everything you’ll need for your new rank. You will be in charge of one of the recon companies along with a junior officer after you finish the basic instructions for being a Recon Marine. We have bunch of squared-away Marines here in the third, and I’m sure you will blend right in with them without problem. My advice to you is to listen to all of them when instructing you to do something and ask as many questions as possible you can think of. This is a well-trained battalion, and we all work together. There aren’t any heroes here. Do I make myself clear, Jim?”

“As clear as can be, sir. I’m sure I’m really going to love it here

and can foresee no problems or will I cause any problems," I spoke as earnestly as I could.

"Good. Then that should be all. Let me get the corporal, and instead of him telling you, I will have him take you where you have to go. Then he can take you to the barracks and get you situated."

He yelled for Corporal Simmons, who appeared immediately, and the colonel told him to take good care of me. He explained what he had to do first, and then the colonel dismissed us both.

"He seems like a pretty good guy for a commanding officer," I tried to start a conversation.

"A dreamer at times. Really thinks that everyone in his unit gets along," it was a surprise out of the corporal's mouth.

"I thought all recons got along. The unit I trained with in Quantico was really together, and they did everything with each other—drink, eat, sleep, and party."

"What outfit were you in at Quantico? I thought they were all officers up there."

"Scout sniper. Was attached to Weapons Battalion for a couple of months, then I was TDY in California and Hawaii, testing a sniper rifle."

Again, he looked at me in amazement. "Sounds like fun. Where did you go in California? I've always wanted to get stationed out there. Hollywood, Beverly Hills, you know all the movie stars. Did you see any while you were there?"

"No, I was TDY at Miramar Naval Air Station and Camp Pendleton. Didn't get to Hollywood or any of the rest of those places. I really wanted to go to Disneyland, but never had the time. It was fun, but we were always busy going to another base."

"How many did you go to?" he was talking as we walked toward the marine store to get my new chevrons.

"I was in California, Hawaii, and Alaska. And oh yeah, can't forget Yuma, Arizona, the shit hole of the world."

“Boy, you’ve been everywhere, and all I have is here. I left West Virginia to see some of this man’s world, and I end up in North Carolina. Boy, I wish I could do what you did or even get out of here, and I don’t care where I go,” he sounded really down.

“Be careful what you wish for. Things aren’t going to well in Vietnam or in Cuba. You don’t want to end up in either of those two places.”

“You know, right now, sergeant, I’d go anywhere ever those two ungodly places.” Sergeant—he was the first one to call me that.

We found the store, and I bought five sets of E-5 tropical chevrons and five sets of lapel insignias for my utilities and two sets for my winter green uniform and one set for my dress blues. The corporal showed me to a cleaner that attaches all the chevrons to the uniforms and that he could do them in half a day. I left there, went to my car to get my seabag, and went back to the cleaner. I gave him all my uniforms that needed sewing, except my dress blues, which were at my parent’s house in Hingham. From there, the Simmons took me to our barracks, and being an E-5 (sergeant), I got my own room off the squad bay. It was the largest room I’d ever had, but it would do. I knew that I was only going to be here for a little while and then possibly going to Cuba and Guantanamo Bay.

I didn’t have much to unpack because I left most of my uniforms at the cleaners. As I was unpacking, I had a bunch of my fellow Marines come to the door. They welcomed me and said how glad they were to have me in their unit. One sergeant who lived across the hall from me said that they heard I was coming, and the colonel had told them all about me and what a great shot I was.

After I finished and took a shower, Corporal Simmons and two other corporals, the sergeant from across the hall and me, walked up to the NCO Club for dinner and a few drinks. All through dinner, Simmons told everyone who listened about all the places that I’d been and what I was doing. Some of the guys listened, and some just shook their heads in disbelief. Overall, we had a great night, and I knew I was

going to enjoy myself here—no matter how long it was going to be for.

I was put in charge of Rifle Squad Bravo, which was one of the three rifle squads. We were part of rifle company, Charlie Company, which was made up of three assault squads, three mortar squads, a weapon's platoon, which was made up of two machine gun teams, three machine gun squads. Then this would bring us to the rifle platoon that was made up of three fire teams, three rifle squads, and if you total everything up, you had a rifle company, which Lt. Colonel Spaulding was in charge of.

The training started each morning at 0430 with a ten-mile run that had to be finished in eighty minutes, which meant that each mile had to be at least eight minutes or less. After the run, we went in and showered and had time to straighten out our living accommodations, as the Marine Corps puts it. After all that was over, we all marched over to the mess hall for breakfast. Rank did have its privileges as all NCOs got a separate line to get our chow. We ate in a different part of the mess hall, away from all the noise and bullshit.

After chow, we would go on a forced march or some other scenario the colonel would come up with to keep us sharp as a tack as he would say. The afternoon was dedicated to firing your weapon on the base firing range. We did this three days a week, and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, we would go to the beach, which was still on Lejeune but east of all living quarters. We would practice amphibious landings and takeoffs. It was a brutal training regimen, but it was definitely worth it. I noticed after the first month of working with my squad that another E-5 would be attached to the unit, and I theorized that if and when I was called away, as was planned, this sergeant would be able to step right in and lead this rifle squad, as if nothing had ever happened.

The funniest sight to see at Camp Lejeune was on Friday afternoons around 1600 hours when everyone, and I mean everyone, seemed to be wanting to leave the base at the same time. Weekend liberty commences at 1600 hours on Friday afternoon, and it ends on Monday

morning at 0600 hours. Most of the personnel at the base who are single would leave by car and go up the I-95 to either Washington, DC (340 miles), New York City (570 miles), or Boston (780 miles). Some Midwest Marines even travel to Chicago (950 miles) on any given weekend. For some reason, most of the single personnel would rather leave on a Friday afternoon and drive all night to Boston, taking thirteen hours and arriving at 0500. They would stay the day and night and leave that Sunday no later than 1500 hours and get back to base right before 0600 hours on Monday. This pilgrimage is done every Friday of the year without fail, and I tried it once with a couple of Bostonians who were in my rifle company. It was probably the most exhausting trip I had ever taken when I was driving myself. The rest of the time, I decided to go home to see my parents and my friends. I would fly out of New Bern Airport and get into Boston around midnight after connecting in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Christmas was coming up soon, and I decided to take a fifteen-day leave and go home and spend the holidays with my folks and my brother, Bob, and his family. I had gone to the PX and bought all sorts of gifts for them, but I was dreading carrying everything on board the plane, especially in Charlotte, getting off the plane with these packages and getting on another Delta plane headed for Boston. I decided that I would leave on December 20 and return on January 3, 1964. I didn't have any plans while I was going to be home, and seeing that I hadn't called Veronica since I left Washington, she wasn't going to be in my holiday plans. The one person I did want to spend time with was my aunt Adelaide, who lived on the other side of Boston in Medford, Massachusetts. My aunt was a very special person because she always saw the good in me, and for all the time that I can remember, I never, ever saw her get mad. She lived on a very small street just outside of West Medford Square, and she was retired. Another thing I remembered all these years was that she was a terrific cook.

When I arrived in Boston, my mother and father picked me up, and we drove back to Hingham. It was about 2000 hours because I

had caught a very early flight out of New Bern, but there was a delay in Charlotte due to inclement weather in New England. When we got to our house, my brother and his wife, Gail, were waiting for me, along with my two-year-old niece, Marylou. My brother asked me so many questions about the Marine Corps and what I was doing in Camp Lejeune and where I had been and how come I never called or wrote for all those months. I told everyone that I had been shot, but I didn't tell them the real story. I thought my mother was going to pass out, and all my father did was nod his head. He asked also if I was all right. The next day, I went to my brother's house to help him put up the Christmas decorations, and then I returned to my house and helped my father do the same thing.

On the twenty-third, I decided to go see my aunt Adelaide, and I left my house at 1000 hours and reached Medford around noon. After hugs and kisses and, of course, something to eat, I said that I would hang some Christmas lights on the outside for her. Gathering up everything I would need and making sure I was bundled up nice and warm, I went out to hang the lights. As I was putting the finishing touches on the bushes, I heard something giggle, and I looked up to see a very pretty girl staring at me.

"What are you doing, Jim?" she said with a smile. She sounded as if she knew me, but she didn't look that familiar.

"Just hanging lights on the bushes for my aunt. How do you know my name?" I asked, putting the hardware down.

"You don't remember me? I'm Linda Collier from next door. Do you remember me now?" She still was smiling.

"I remember a Linda who was probably the worst pest in the world before I went into the Marines. You can't be her," I said, giving her a hug.

She was beautiful, but I meant what I had said. When I used to come over for weekends to help my aunt with her house, she would be out in the yard asking me questions over and over and just being a real pain in the ass. I hadn't seen her in probably five years, and she

had really grown up. To think of this girl who was probably ten years my junior as something special was kind of odd.

“What have you been doing with yourself, Linda?”

“I’m a senior in high school, and then I plan on going to U of Mass next fall. I have a favor to ask you, and you can say no if you want. I have a winter formal on December 28, and I was wondering if you would like to take me. I’ve waited all this time to ask you.” She seemed in dire need, but she was just a kid.

“Linda, I would love to take you, but why don’t you go with someone closer to your age? How old are you anyway?” I was not trying to be mean by my statement or my question.

“I will be eighteen next month, and don’t you remember what I told you years ago when you used to ignore me? I told you that one day, you and I would get married, so I’m starting by asking you to a dance. It’s formal, but you can wear your uniform if you’d like. I’ve already bought the tickets. The only thing that you may not like is that we have to go with my best friend, Sandy, and her boyfriend, if that’s all right.”

“Linda, can I have a little time to think about this? I’m going to be here until tomorrow night, so I’ll give you an answer as soon as possible. I tell you what. What are you doing tonight? Would you like to go to a movie? This way, we’ll get to know each other. I’ve changed a lot since you knew me when you were a kid.”

“You haven’t changed that much. You’re still good looking and sweet. I’ll see you tonight around 7 o’clock.” She turned and ran into her house.

I went into my aunt’s house. She was sitting near the window, and I knew she heard everything. “Did you know about this dance and that she was going to ask me?” I asked with no emotion in my voice.

“Yes, I knew about it, and I tried to talk her out of it. She has the biggest crush on you and has for a lot of years. Please, Jim, don’t hurt her. She is such a nice girl, and she’s been very good to me. Her friend, Sandy Gelson, will probably be moving in here with me because her family is moving to Greenville, North Carolina, because her father

has gotten a promotion with his company. Is Greenville close to Camp Lejeune?" She was so sweet and manipulating in a good way.

"Greenville is where East Carolina College is, and I've gone up there couple of times for football games. It's a nice, quiet southern town. And no, I won't hurt her, and I think the dance will be fun. I will say one thing. She really has changed for the better as she grew up."

We went out that night and every night to the dance. We even went to midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and I spent the Christmas night at her house with her family until we both got bored and decided to go for a drive. She told me where to go because I wasn't that familiar with the area, and we ended up at Mystic Lake—a necking spot for the Medford High School kids.

I got my dress blues cleaned and had my sergeant chevrons put on the sleeves. I went out and bought white gloves (mandatory in wearing dress blues), and I even bought Linda a corsage for the occasion. I picked her up that night at 1830 hours because we were going for dinner at a restaurant in Cambridge right down the street from where the dance was being held. After I picked Linda up, we went to Sandy's house to pick her and her boyfriend, Bill, up and then headed to Cambridge. Linda insisted that we both go in to meet Sandy's parents and for them to meet me.

We went into the house, and I shook hand with Mr. Gelson, who insisted that I call him Neil, and I met his wife, Betty. Neil said that he would be moving to Greenville, North Carolina, within the next six weeks, and he gave me his address and told me to come by anytime if I was in the vicinity. Sandy was about the same height as Linda, five feet four, and they probably weighed the same, one hundred pounds. However, Sandy was a brunette, while Linda was a true blonde. Sandy's boyfriend, Bill, was a sophomore at Boston College, and he was studying to be a lawyer, just as his father was. We all had our pictures taken, and then we were off to the dinner and dance.

After dinner, we got ready to leave and go to the dance, but before that, I asked Linda to look me over and make sure I didn't spill anything

on my uniform. Everything was shipshape, so off to the dance we went, and as we entered, I never felt so old in my life or had so many eyes on me. I wasn't that much older than most of the kids at the dance, maybe a couple of years, but I just felt a little more mature—maybe it was the uniform. I did have the prettiest girl at the dance. I could tell that Linda was really proud to have me as her date, and when I met some of her friends and teachers, she just had that look on her face that told everyone that I was hers and how great that was.

After that night, we spent as much time together that time would allow and with me not ignoring my parents or my brother. I just couldn't get enough being with Linda, and I knew that I would have to be going back to Lejeune soon. I had no idea when I would be back. The night, before I was to go back, we went out for dinner, and then we went to our favorite place—Mystic Lake. We kissed awhile, but this night was for talking and for getting things out in the open.

"Linda, I know that you're still in high school and that you want to go to college, but for some reason, God only knows that I love you with all my heart. I can't stand the thought of you not being with me or that I may not see you for a long time. These past few days have been terrific, and this is the first time that I have ever said that I wished that I didn't have to go back to the base. When you get out of high school, what do you say we get married and then you can move down to Lejeune and be a Marine's wife?" I was laying everything out there, and to be honest, I really didn't know how she would respond.

"Jim, I love you so much, and I would quit school right now and marry you. I'll graduate in June, and yes, I will marry you then. We can live anywhere you want. This is the happiest day of my life." With that, we kissed a very long and exciting kiss, and the rest of the night was just something really special to remember always.

"Linda and I are getting married when she graduates from school," I told my mother when I returned that evening. My mom always

waited up or was awake when I came home. She just wanted to make sure I was safe and sound and to talk if I wanted to.

“What school? High school or college?” she asked while pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“High school. This summer. I really love her, Mom, and I can’t live without her.”

“I really love Linda,” she said, “but she’s only seventeen, and you’re only twenty-one. Don’t you think you’re rushing this a little? I know you’ve known her since you two were young, but you hadn’t seen her for five years before the twenty-third, and this has been a whirlwind romance. All I’m saying is while you’re back on base, if the feelings are still there in a month or two, then start planning your future. But don’t rush into something you’ll regret for the rest of your life. Remember, we are Catholics. We don’t believe in divorce, and you could be miserable for the rest of your life. If you don’t believe what I’ve just said, go ask your father or even your brother. You know those two don’t always get along, and he could have done better but wouldn’t listen to anyone either,” she was stating the obvious. My mother and sister-in-law just didn’t get along and probably never would.

My folks drove me into the airport, and the Colliers drove Linda in also. We sat in the lobby of Delta Airlines, talking about the future and how much we loved each other and that nothing would keep us apart. I told her that I would be making plans for her to come down and visit the base right after she graduated, and if I was still in the states, I would be at her graduation with bells on. Time was running shot, and we walked over and spoke to our parents. Then it was time to go. I kissed my mom and shook hands with my father. I also shook hands with Linda’s dad and hugged my future mother-in-law, and then it was time for me to say goodbye to Linda.

“I will call you tonight when I get there. I’m going to try to get up here at least two times a month from now on, and I will call every night while I’m away. I can’t stand leaving you like this, but remember the great times we had while I was here. They were great times for you

too, weren't they?" Paranoia was starting to set in.

"I told you before that you have given me the greatest Christmas present ever by just being yourself and giving everything you have to me. Hopefully, the days will fly by and I will be Mrs. James Coleman as soon as possible. Now don't do anything stupid to get in trouble trying to come up here when you shouldn't. I know there are strict rules that you have to abide by, and don't break them. June isn't that far away, and then I'll be with you forever." She then kissed me goodbye, and I boarded the plane for the long trip back to reality.

While I was up north, I never once thought of the things that I had done and the things that I would probably do, and of course, I never thought of the fact that the commander said that he would get in touch with me after a few months of my training. Now was the few months, and as I returned to Lejeune, there were a number of messages from the commander to call him immediately when I returned. I sat on the edge of my bunk, all alone and thinking of Linda and our future.

I then called the commander. "I've met someone, and we are going to get married this summer," I blurted out before he could say anything to me about what was coming up and why he needed to speak with me so urgently.

"I had a great Christmas. Thank you for asking. Sounds as if you had the best Christmas ever. Is it the nurse?"

"No, it's a girl that I've known for most of my life, but I kind of saw her in a different light this time." I went on to tell him the whole story without leaving out anything and how we planned on getting married in August after she graduated in June. He didn't say anything on the other end of the phone, but I could hear him breathing, and when I said that I was getting married probably in August, I could hear him hold his breath.

When I finished, I waited for him to say something odd or disgusting, but all he said was "Congratulations. I wish you both the best in life. Now can I get to what I was calling you about? I need you to be at this line at 2200 hours this evening, and I will go over your next

assignment. Remember, 2200 hours. Jim, congrats again. Wish you the best. We'll talk more when we are together." And then he hung up.

It was now 1000 Monday morning, and we just finished our monthly inspection. Tomorrow at 0900 hours, we would have a full equipment inspections with uniforms, underwear, shoes, etc. This is known in the Marine Corps as "junk on the bunk." If you are a private or PFC, you really worry about these kind of inspections because the "old salts" kind of exaggerate on how much an officer or a senior staff NCO can be so critical and have you stand all sorts of extra duty if you flunk this inspection. It's a very simple inspection—put out all your uniforms and fold them exactly how you've been taught, and that goes for everything else you own. You'll be instructed on how to put your personal items out for inspection, and that's all there is to it. I'd never flunked one, and I never saw anyone else flunk one.

The day went by as slow as it could, and all I could think of was Linda and how much I missed her. I called her from the pay phone in the barracks, and I talked to her for about ten minutes or when I ran out of change. She told me that her father said that I was to call collect the next time I called, but I told her we would have to not talk long or he would get a bill larger than the national debt. Right before I hung up from her, I told her that I was waiting for a very important phone call from Washington, and that the person I would speak with next would tell me where and when my new duty station would be. We told each other how we loved each other, and I hung up and started walking toward the CO's office while I was waiting for my call.

At 2200 on the dot, the phone started to ring, and I picked it up. But I wasn't to say anything until the spy people from both Washington and Lejeune had made sure the telephone was clean, and then we could talk. After about five minutes, the green light on the colonel's phone blinked. That meant that everything was fine, and conversation could commence.

"Commander, this is Jim. Can you hear me all right?"

"Loud and clear, Corporal. Now let's get down to business. A new

target has been approved from the last target we spoke of when you were in Bethesda. Your commanding officer has been notified, and you will leave Camp Lejeune on Wednesday at whatever time you decide. You're to be in Langley and in my office no later than 1600 hours on Friday. Is that understood, Corporal? You are to bring everything that you own with you, and as protocol calls for, you are not to tell anyone what you are doing or where you are going. That means anyone, Corporal. Again, do you understand, or do you have any questions?"

"No, sir. I have no questions, and I do know the protocol. No one has ever learned anything from me, and no one ever will. Is this target still in the same location that the other one was?" I was curious to see if I was going to Cuba.

"We will discuss that on Friday. See you then, and don't be late." He immediately hung up so I couldn't get the last word in.

Sitting there in the colonel's office. I thought to myself, *Fuck him. I don't talk, and he had no call for saying to keep my mouth shut.* This was the most unfriendly that the commander had sounded since I'd been working for him. I'd been in his shit house before, but when it came to a mission, he was always friendly. *Well, fuck him, and I'll see what's grabbing his nuts on Friday, and don't you ever be late. Fuck him.*

I left the colonel's office and went back to the barracks and started to pack. Frank Patuco, a fellow sergeant, came into my room and wanted to know why I was packing and where I was going.

"Have to report to 8th & I Barracks (used as description, if not Headquarters Marine Corps) by Friday at 1600. I'm going to TDY there for a while, but I should be back here in a couple of months."

"We'll miss you, and if there is anything I can do while you're gone, let me know." We shook hands.

The next morning, I packed my car and then drove over to headquarters to see Colonel Spalding and say goodbye. As I entered the main office, no one looked up or even asked if they could help me. It felt like I was brand new again and a complete stranger.

"The colonel will see you in a minute, Sergeant," the clerk said

without looking up.

I was ushered into the colonel's office, and I stood at attention in front of his desk for what felt like ten minutes but probably only a couple of minutes.

"At ease, Jim. I knew when you first came here that you were something special because of the way you were stuffed down my throat, and I had no say one way or another if I wanted you. You turned out to be one of the best NCO that was in charge of one of our rifle squads, but when I got the call yesterday, I couldn't believe how it was put to me." And I guessed he stopped, waiting for me to answer, but there was no question. He continued, "I know that you are the best shot in the Marines and that you've been TDY for most of the time you've been in the Corps, but I've never, ever been talked to like I was yesterday and by a squid and a commander at that. Do you know who Commander Damon is? Of course, you do, or he wouldn't have called here. He told me you have to report to a designated location that you already know in Washington no later than 1600 hours on Friday, January 10. I'm at a loss for answer, but I've been in this man's Marine Corps for over fifteen years, and I've come to expect anything. But Jim I've got to tell you, this is a first." He shook my hand and gave me a copy of my TDY orders and an envelope with two hundred dollars that would be used for my transportation needs.

As I left the headquarters, I started to think of Linda and what I was going to tell her and if I should tell her that I would be going to Washington. Maybe if the commander didn't have me doing anything for the weekend, I could leave on Friday night for home and Linda and be back early Monday morning. I would have to see after I meet with his lord and highness.

Driving up to Washington was uneventful, except for when I got on I-95. I could have sworn that I had a car follow me all the way to Richmond. The reason was when I got off the highway and stopped for a sandwich and gas, the same car got off, but as I was going into the restaurant parking lot, he passed me going west. When I got back

on the highway, I didn't notice anybody, but about ten miles up the road, the same car was two cars behind me and followed all the way to the outskirts of Richmond. Then he got off the highway, and I didn't notice anyone following all the way to Langley.

I arrived in McLean, Virginia, around 1800 hours the same night, and I found a motel not too far from CIA headquarters. I paid cash and registered under a different name, and they didn't ask me for any identification. That car was still in my mind, and I knew I had to tell the commander as soon as we met. I went next door to the motel to a steak restaurant and ordered a T-bone with fries and a milk shake, only the best if it's on the Marine Corps dime.

After I finished, I walked around to find a phone, but there were no phone booths. So I walked back to the motel and found a phone in the lobby that I could use and pay separately when I was finished. The phone rang only twice, and she picked it up. She sounded down and very despondent.

"What's troubling you tonight? Tough day in school?" I asked, trying to sound concerned, but I wasn't.

"I was talking to a girl who's in my class, and she knows that we go together. She told me not to get too involved with a Marine because they are never faithful. I'm so worried you're going to find someone else, and I'll lose you."

"You're not going to lose me, and the night of the dance you found out that I was still a virgin doesn't that prove that I'm not a gigolo. I'm coming home this weekend, and we can work this all out. But I'm telling you, there is nothing to worry about. If anyone ever breaks up with anyone, it will be you." Now I was concerned.

After that call with Linda, I didn't sleep that well, and I was up and dressed by 0730. I then decided to call the commander and see if I could see him earlier and then head out for home. I called his office, but he hadn't arrived yet. His secretary told me that he had a light schedule in the morning, and she would mention to him that I'd arrived and wanted to meet with him earlier. She also suggested that I

would just come over around 0830, and if I couldn't see him till 1600, then I'd know. But I should be here if I could. Crazy, but I understood all that.

I drove over to the CIA headquarters at about 0810. I still had my pass, so I showed it to the gate guard. He passed me through with no problem. I went directly to the elevator and up to the third floor, and as I came off the elevator, I ran smack into Sean.

"What the hell are you doing here so early?" he asked with a hint of confusion.

"I got here from Lejeune last night, and there really isn't that much to do around here. So I thought I'd come over and see if I could have me meeting with his majesty prior to 1600. Are you going to be in our meeting?"

"I don't think so. I'm supposed to meet with him at 0900 and then head back to Cuba. I really don't know what your meeting is about, but I'll be gone by 1600. He may have something else in mind for you. You know we are about to really get involved in Vietnam, and there are more troops being sent over there every month. It started with a few advisers and then some Green Berets going over to train the South Vietnamese army, but it looks like the First Marine Division may end up there pretty soon. He may want to talk to you about that. Whatever it is, I can guarantee you it won't be good. I'll walk with you to his office." We walked side by side a few feet to his office.

His secretary, Ms. Gordon, said that he still wasn't in, and she suggested that we go down to the commissary and get some coffee, or we could just sit there and wait. I had four cups of coffee with breakfast, so I really didn't want any more. Also, I knew Sean didn't drink coffee, only tea or Irish whiskey.

"What the hell are you doing here? We are to meet at 1600, not 0900," the commander greeted, and he was not very happy to see me.

"I came in early, and I thought I'd come over and see if we could meet now. Not much to do around here to kill time."

'Well, when I say 1600, that's what the fuck I mean. I can't see you

till then. Why don't you take a ride to Bethesda and see that nurse you had the hot for?" he said with a smirk.

"Very funny. You know I don't have any more interest in her. I'd like to go to Boston tonight for the weekend, and I thought I'd get an early start. But I'll wait till 1600 if I have too," I stated, almost spitting the words out.

"You're not going anywhere this weekend. We have a lot to do, and I may need you at any time. So you're confined to 8th & I Barracks. You were just home. Didn't you get enough while you were there?" he stated again with a smirk, and as he said it, he knew I was fuming.

I didn't say anything right away, trying to control my temper. When I finally got myself together, I said, "Commander, I'm going home one way or another this weekend. If you need me, I'll give you my parents' phone number, and I can be back here in seven hours." As I finished, I turned, opened the door, and walked down the hallway toward the elevators.

From behind the closed door, I heard him scream, "You leave this area this weekend and I'll have you in the brig you ungrateful little motherfucker!" The elevator came, and I got into it to the first floor and out the door.

I drove over toward 8th & I Barracks to check in for the night, but I couldn't get that threat out of my head. He was going to put me in the brig if I go to Boston. *Put me in the brig? Fuck him. He needs me. If I'm in the brig, who's going to kill all these motherfuckers that he wants dead?* I was really starting to get a hate on. This ungrateful fucking excuse for an officer. *Who does he think he is? I have a good mind to leave now for Boston. Fuck our meeting, and see what he does about that.*

I was really upset. I got my room and went in, and it kept up. I was talking to myself so loudly that someone knocked a couple of times on the door to make sure I was all right. It was only ten miles to McLean and CIA headquarters. I didn't want to get there too early, or he'd have another fit. I decided to leave at 1500, and that would give me an hour to get there even if there is traffic. As I came up to the gate, I took out

my badge and showed it to the guard, but he held it and picked up the phone.

“He’s here. What do you want me to do with him?” he asked into the phone.

I couldn’t hear what was being said on the other side of the line, but the guard kept saying, “Yes, sir,” and he would turn and look at me. Finally, he hung up the phone, came over, and told me to park my car over across from the gate, and someone would be here to escort you to where you were supposed to be.

I waited for about fifteen minutes, and then a van pulled up right in front of my car. Two men dressed in black with white shirts and dark ties got out and walked to my car. One came to my window, and the other stood by the passenger window with his hand on his gun.

I rolled down the window, and before he could say anything, I said, “What the hell is going on? I have a meeting with Commander Damon at 1600 hours, and I’ve always been able to just go right in with my badge.”

“Nothing is going on. The commander wanted us to come down to meet you and escort you to a different location for your meeting. You can leave your car here and ride with us.” He opened my door and stood back.

I got into the van, and we went up the drive but didn’t stop in front of the headquarters. It kept driving toward the end of the building, and then we took a right and went down this long driveway. As we approached the end, we took another right and then a quick left and stopped in front of what resembled a garage.

“This is it, Sergeant. You go right through that door, and someone will be there to show you to the commander. Have a pleasant day,” he was talking as I got out of the van.

As I closed the door, the van sped off around the corner, and it was gone. I went to the door, but I couldn’t help but notice that there were no windows on this building. Also there was a huge vent hose coming out of the building on the roof. I would guess the whole

building was twenty feet squared with one door. I opened that one door and stepped inside, knowing I wouldn't be surprised at anything that would happen.

"Come right in, Sergeant. May I get you something to drink or eat?" Ms. Gordon said with the same smile she always had.

"No, thank you. I'm fine. Is the commander here yet?"

"He's on his way, but I can show you to the meeting room if you'd like." She came around her desk and pointed to the direction we were to walk.

I followed her almost to the back of the building, but we stopped about two feet away and entered the door on the left. It was a square room. It looked like the average-size living room back home. As I thought that, I started to think of Linda and how she was expecting me this weekend. *I am still going home no matter what he says*, I thought to myself.

The door opened, and in walked the commander accompanied by Mrs. Garcia, who I had met with before, and Umberto Rodriguez, the Cuban freedom fighter that I had met previously.

"Jim, you remember Mrs. Garcia?" She came into the room and stuck out her hand for me to shake it.

"Of course, and how are you today, Mrs. Garcia? Nice to see you again, Mr. Rodriguez." I was thinking that this definitely had something to do with Cuba, so Sean had lied to me.

"Please, everyone, have a seat, and is there anything I can get anyone? A drink or food? Anything you want."

We both said, "No, thank you," and we sat down.

"Commander, before we start, there is something I think you should know. On my way up here, I think I was followed by a black 1964 Ford Fairlane four-door sedan with Virginia plates, but I couldn't make out the numbers on the plate."

"Now how do you know they were following you?" he asked with skepticism.

I went on to tell him that after I got on the highway, I noticed a car behind me with two people in the front seat, and they stayed right there all the way to the Virginia Border when I got off for lunch and gas. I told them how they got off but passed the restaurant when I went in. I told him that after I got back on the highway, they were behind me again and all the way to Richmond, where they got off, and I didn't see them since. I just looked at him as he took this all in.

Finally, he said, "We'll discuss this later, but let's get down to why Mrs. Garcia is here today. The reason we are meeting out back of my office is because what we are about to discuss is highly confidential, and it's going to be the most covert operation that I have ever run. Jim, what you are about to hear is probably the most sensitive information that you will hear all the time that you work with the CIA. The code name is CIGAR, and the operation is the ASSASSINATION OF FIDEL CASTRO. Mrs. Garcia is Castro's half-sister who has been living in the United States for six years since her disagreement with him on how he was running the country.

"She has been very involved with the Cuban patriots in Miami Fuerza Aerea de Liberacion since she arrived here and wants to help in any way she can to rid Cuba of her half-brother, as does Umberto. The only problem we will have is that Castro has about six to ten men who look exactly like him going out in public instead of him. What we have to do is figure out the one place that Castro will be in public that won't be a substitute, and that's when you can get him. Sean Callahan is on his way back to Cuba, and he will try to get information from his people as to where and when he can be taken. Mrs. Garcia will go over as many photos of Castro with you so you can tell if the person you see is real or a phony."

"Jim, Fidel is a very clever man. He is not stupid. He knows that there is a price on his head, and for some sick reason, he enjoys that. It makes him bigger than anybody else. We have to find the one celebration, birthday party, or something that the Cuban people will be coming out for. Fidel cannot resist talking in public. He thrives on

this, and he's very good at it. He will speak for hours without taking a break. That's when he is the most vulnerable. The other problem that you may have is that when he is in public, the whole area is shut down and guarded by a small army. You will get one chance at this, and the odds of you succeeding is very low because of his security. Commander." She turned the briefing over to the boss.

"Thank you, Mrs. Garcia. You were as always very precise. Jim, you will be TDY to Guantanamo Bay—probably within the next ten days. You will be assigned to the Marine Detachment Military Police at the naval base, and you will be there for no more than two months. The first month, you'll be with the MPs, and the second month, you will be attached TDY to Air America. That's the name of the covert CIA personnel in country that also was part of the fiasco and embarrassment that was the Bay of Pigs, April 17, 1961. Sean is heading this group, which is part Cuban defectors and Cuban citizens unhappy with Castro. You'll have maps, routes that Castro takes, support from the citizens, and an exit strategy before you even go in. Jim, this has to be done, and this has been approved from the highest in our government, the president of the United States. Do you have any questions, concerns, etcetera?" He sat down.

"No, sir. I have no questions, but I have a bunch of concerns. One is that I assume this hit will be made at night because if it's done in the daytime, I'm a done turkey."

Mrs. Garcia looked at me very strange like she did not understand the last statement.

"Mrs. Garcia, I'm sorry that I said done turkey. What I meant to say is dead duck. Do you understand that?" I was smiling all the time as I was speaking with her.

We went round and around on the many points of doing this mission. But as usual, my points were ignored, and the commander's way was accepted by him, not me. Mrs. Garcia and I went over the pictures of Castro, and she showed me some scars on his face that I would be able to see through my scope. The commander kept saying

that if we kill a stand-in, then it's all over for killing Castro. We'd get one shot at this, and that was it.

Sometimes doing these things as we did in Thailand and ever when we were talking about Louisiana, I felt the commander thought that all I was good for was firing a rifle and that my suggestions would go by the wayside. We finished up at 2230 hours, but Mrs. Garcia had left about two hours earlier. When we finished, the commander said he'd give me a ride back to my car.

When we got in, he turned and asked, "Do you still want to go to Boston?" I told him I had to. It was very important with my relationship with Linda. He said I could go, but he was going to send one of his men with me.

"I don't need a bodyguard."

"The only way that you're leaving here this evening is if I send someone with you. This is not open for debate. If you, as you say, have to go to make sure of your relationship, whatever that means, then you'll do what I want, or you'll be confined to base. That's it. Take it or leave it." He was not mad but very firm in his voice.

"I guess you're not giving me much of a choice. Who are you going to send with me? Can I have a pick?"

"No, I'll send the best man I have for incidence like these. I should send a female, and that would really fuck up your relationship." He started to laugh, and he had that look that he really wanted to do that.

"You wouldn't. If you did that, then I wouldn't go. That would be fine with you, but what kind of operative will I be in the future?"

"I hope you aren't trying to threaten me because, young man, that would not turn out too well for you."

"I'm not threatening anyone. But if I'm really unhappy and the only thing I can think of is how you fucked up the one thing I really want, then how good am I going to be to you?"

"Very well. I'm going to send Simon with you. He's young enough to blend in, and he's single and one tough son of a bitch, if anything

happens up there. Is that selection all right with you?"

Josiah Simon was around six feet two and about two hundred pounds. He was a graduate of Florida State University, where he played defensive end on the football team and rugby. He was thirty-one years old, never married, but he had a girlfriend in the FBI. Personally, he was one of the nicest guys who worked for the commander.

"I think Josey would fit in fine. When can we leave?"

"I imagine your clothes are already in your car, but you'll be taking one of our cars. He should be here in about ten minutes, and you'll move your bags to the company car. The company car is a 1964 Ford Galaxy 500, two-door hardtop with a SOHC 427 "crammer" challenger engine. It was designed for NASCAR, but the company had all the new Fords equipped with them. The bodies of all the new cars had windows that were bulletproof, and the body's metal could withstand shots from any high-powered rifle.

"These changes had been brought to the company because of two things—the Kennedy assassination and the new James Bond movies. These movies were based on a fictional character who worked for the British Secret Service and had a license to kill. In the movies, Bond had the coolest of cars with all the bells and whistles the writer, Ian Fleming, could imagine. How long do you think it will take you to get to Boston?" the commander asked, trying to pass the time without me going crazy.

"It usually takes around six hours. It's 2000 now, so if he shows right this minute, we should get up there by 0200 or a little later tomorrow morning," as I finished that sentence, Josey came up the driveway.

"Do you want me to call Linda or your folks? Where will you be staying while you're there?"

"I or should I say 'we' will be staying with my folks. Josey can have my brother's old room, and it's across the hall from my room. No need to call because my folks are used to me bringing people home."

"Are they used to you bringing people home who are carrying guns? And by the way, I want you to carry a gun at all times. I've

arranged and you've been issued a gun license in Massachusetts already, and the Washington license that you didn't know you have will protect you in all the states you'll be driving through. Agent Simon has all the information you need, and he also has your weapon. But it's not what you're used to. It's a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum, which is one hell of a gun."

"What was wrong with my .45 caliber? It could get the job done, and I'm used to it."

"Military weapon that would not be good if you had to use it. Too many questions to answer, which could be embarrassing to everyone involved, and this gun does the job better than your gun."

"Stop calling it a fucking gun. You fucking squids wouldn't know a weapon or piece from a gun. In the Marine Corps, we never call anything a gun," I did say this with a smile so he wouldn't go crazy because of my disrespect.

"Very well. Have a great trip. Straighten out all you problems with your girlfriend, and I'll see you back here sometime Monday. Simon knows when you have to be back. Remember, you'll leave for Cuba next week, so come back prepared." He walked me to the car and then shook my hand.

The ride to Boston was very uneventful, and the conversation within the car was just the same. Simon wasn't the most talkative person I had ever ridden with. Every once in a while, he would get off the highway and travel on side roads for a few miles and then get back on the highway. He said he did that just to be safe. We arrived in Hingham around 0430 hours, and when we walked up to the back porch, my mother was in the kitchen and my father was in the living room. As we entered, they both were in the kitchen. I introduced Josey to them, and then I showed him where his room was, and then I went back down to talk to my folks.

"What the hell is going on, Jim? Who is that man, and why is he carrying a gun?" my father asked without his usual calm demeanor.

"He's someone I work with."

"He's in the Marine Corps?" my mother chimed in.

"Well, no, not exactly. He works for the government, and sometimes I'm on loan to that agency they call TDY, which means temporary duty."

"What's the name of the agency, son?"

"Dad, that's classified. But I can assure you that everything is okay and that I'm not in danger. The only reason Josey is with me is because we have an assignment coming up, and Headquarters Marine Corps just wants to make sure everything goes according to plan."

"I thought you said you're on temporary duty with an agency that you can't tell us about because it's classified. You have brought home a coworker who is carrying a gun, and you say there's nothing to worry about? Do you take us for fools?" He was starting to get upset, and I really didn't need Josey to hear this.

"Dad, please. Have faith in me, and believe that I wouldn't do anything that would jeopardize my life or anyone else's life. Everything is okay. It's just the government that gets paranoid, and they just overreact at times. Let's talk about something else. What's new with you guys? How's Bobby and his family? Anything new with them?"

"No, nothing is new with anyone. It's just the same all the time. Are you going to see Linda tomorrow, or I should say today? She calls me almost every day, and we talk about you for about a half hour. She wants to know everything about you when you were a baby to now. She's a lovely girl, but she's awfully young, Jim. Are you sure that you two know what you're doing?" My mother always worries about me, and I knew that they weren't buying what I was selling about the bodyguard. I got up, said good night, and went to bed for a few hours.

I got up around 1000 hours and walked downstairs. I could smell bacon and heard the coffee percolating. I knew that my mother was going to fix a huge breakfast for Josey and me. As I came around the corner of the living room to the kitchen, I could hear a man laughing. Josey was sitting at the kitchen table, listening to my mother tell him

stories about me when I was young. I didn't really want to hear them, so I went into the dining room, took the phone, and called Linda.

"I'm so happy to hear your voice. I didn't hear from you last night, and I got worried. Are you alright? What time will you be coming over here?" she asked and a thousand more questions before I told her I'd see her this afternoon around 2:00 p.m.

"But I have a friend with me, and he'll be with us this afternoon."

She went to ask about a thousand more questions about me, but I said I'd explain when we were together. I hung up on her during mid-sentence. I went back to the kitchen and sat down to listen to my mother tell my coworker the most embarrassing stories about when I was a baby and how I talked and when I first went to school. If I had my gun, I think I would have shot myself.

After we finished breakfast, we both took showers and got dressed. Then we sat in the living room with my father. He was watching a football game on TV, but you could tell he wasn't really interested in it. He would look at Josey every so often but wouldn't say anything.

"Mr. Coleman, I couldn't help but hear your discussion with Jim last night, and please let me try to put your mind at ease." With that, my mother came out of the kitchen and stood at the doorway of the living room. "Jim is on a special assignment for the Department of Defense, which I work for. It is a very secretive mission, and if you knew how the DOD works, they send people out with other people just to make sure everything goes well. It's not a dangerous assignment, but it is very secretive. It does have a lot to do with the protection of the United States," he said, but nothing was said in return. He was an expert.

For some reason, they bought what Josey said, and they became very relaxed and just started to ask him personal questions, like where he was from, what his parents do, and things like that. Josey answered like he'd done this before, and he was a real expert at it. Again, it was like saying a lot but actually saying nothing. When we finished, we got ready to leave and see Linda, and I knew that wasn't going to go

as easy as this had. I knew I was in trouble for hanging up on her in mid-sentence. As we approached the car, Josey tossed me the keys and said to drive.

“You know the route a hell of lot better than me, and this will give me a chance to look over the area.”

“What are you looking for? We are just going to go on the expressway through Boston and then to Medford. About a forty-minute trip if there is no traffic. Do you want me to do that thing you did this morning where you got off and on the highway?” I was trying to be funny, but he didn’t laugh.

“You may think this shit is a big joke, but believe me, I’ve been doing this for a few years. There’s nothing funny in somebody shooting at you. You’re in a different element, Jim, and there are people out there, or maybe not, trying to find out who you are and maybe trying to stop whatever you’re supposed to do. That’s why the commander sent me with you, and believe me, I won’t let anything happen to you or your very nice parents. Just to ease your mind, I have asked the local police to set up surveillance around your home for your parents’ protection. I’m sure it’s not necessary, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. Your mother is a charmer, and the stories she told about you—wow, you were something else as a little one.” He laughed when he saw me blush.

We pulled up to my aunt’s house and drove around back to park in her garage. As I was closing the garage door and went to turn, Linda was standing right in front of me. Josey turned, having a big smirk on his face.

“Who do you think you are for hanging up on me this morning? I was so worried about you, and you don’t tell me anything. Now I see you have a bodyguard with you.”

“Linda, this is Josey Simon, and he’s not my bodyguard. Why would I need a bodyguard? He didn’t have anything to do this weekend, and I asked him if he wanted to come up to Boston and meet my girl. Nothing is secret, but we’ve driven all night. I just needed some sleep.

I apologize for hanging up on you, but I thought you were finished talking. Please forgive me.”

I moved in to kiss her. She kissed me, but I could tell that I wasn't out of the woods yet. Thankfully, my aunt came out of the house, and that eased everything for a while. My aunt convinced Josey to come into the house and taste her famous toll house cookies. This would give Linda and me a chance to talk by ourselves. My aunt had a picnic table and chairs in her backyard, so we went over and sat down opposite each other but able to hold.

“Jim, are you going to tell me what's going on? Do you know that we had two people from the FBI here yesterday, and they were asking all sorts of questions about you and me and how long I had known you and did I know what you did in the Marine Corps? They said it was a top-secret clearance.”

I didn't know if they were who they said they were, but I was going to check with Josey when I got a chance.

“Linda, what I'm doing in the next couple of months is classified, and I can't tell anyone about it. To be honest, I don't really know that much about it yet. I'm working with the Department of Defense. The government is rather paranoid, so they've sent Josey with me to make sure everything goes all right. It's not dangerous, and I will be back home before you know it or before you graduate. I wouldn't miss that for the world.”

I thought I'd use some of the bullshit that Josey used on my mother, and for some strange reason, it seemed to work. We stayed out back for about an hour, and we went inside my aunt's house and had some cookies. Again, I had to answer a thousand questions from my aunt, but I could tell her anything because she has always believed anything I told her.

The weekend or one and half days went extremely well, and everything went off without a hitch. We went to the movies on Saturday night, and Josey sat at the back of the theater. Then we went out for something to eat afterward, but he stayed in the car.

The next day, we went back over in the morning, and Linda and I went to Sunday mass with my aunt and her family. To my surprise, Josey also came into the church but sat up back. After church, we went out for brunch, and then we had to go back to Washington. I spent about thirty minutes saying or kissing goodbye.

I told Linda that this would be the last time I'd be seeing her for a couple of months, but I would call when I got a chance. I told her I'd definitely write every day, and I'd let her know where I was being based as soon as possible. Josey and I got into the Galaxy and drove back to my parents' house. We picked up our stuff and then headed back to Washington. On the ride back, I remembered to ask Josey what Linda had told me.

"Hey, Linda told me something that I wanted to run by you and make sure it was kosher. It seems two agents from the FBI came to her house on Friday and asked all sorts of questions about me, my family, and if she knew what I was doing in the Marine Corps and a whole bunch more supposedly for a top-secret clearance. Have you ever heard anything like this before?"

"It's possible, but I never heard them ask specific questions like that, but when you're dealing with the FBI, you never know what they are going to ask. We'll run it by the commander when we get back. Do you know if your folks had any visitors?"

"I don't think so because they would have said something."

"Well, I know the FBI usually goes around to neighbors, high schools, teachers, and people who would have known you but aren't related to you. I bet your aunt wasn't asked either," he didn't sound too concerned.

Again, we had a very uneventful trip back. Josey got off the highways every so often, took side roads through small towns, and then back on. We got back to Washington around midnight, and he dropped me off my car.

"Are you going back to 8th & I now?" he asked as I was going to my car.

“Yes. That’s the only place that I still got a room or at least I hope I do because I’m really tired.”

“Jim, I want to really thank you for a great weekend. Your family and Linda’s are out of sight. They really make you feel welcome even under these circumstances, and you really did a great job answering their questions without really answering them. You’re learning.”

“You’re welcome, and I know they really enjoyed you, especially my aunt. I think she has a brand-new nephew.” I got into my car and started the ten-mile ride to HQMC and my bunk.

As I pulled out of the driveway at CIA headquarters, I took a left and noticed a car pull out as I passed. It was a 1964 Black Ford Fairlane—the same one that followed me from Camp Lejeune. I drove directly to 8th & I Barracks and pulled into the gate.

“Don’t look up, but is there a black Ford Fairlane on the street?” I asked the Marine MP on the gate.

“One just drove by. Is there a problem, Sergeant?”

“I hope not, but thanks.” I drove into the parking lot and parked in the space that said NCOs ONLY.

I went into the barracks and registered with the Duty NCO, and then I went to my room. I was going to call the commander, but I thought twice about it because it was now 0115. He’s asleep, and what could he do at this hour anyway?

The following morning, I was up at 0630. I showered, dressed, and went to the mess hall to get a cup of coffee and a little light breakfast. As I was sitting by myself, a staff sergeant sat down opposite me but said nothing. I didn’t recognize him, but that didn’t mean anything because there were over two hundred men and women based here at Henderson Hall. So it did make sense that I didn’t know or recognize everyone. He just sat there and ate his breakfast, not saying a word. All of a sudden, he got up and leaned forward, slid a note to me, picked up his tray, and moved out. I picked up the note, and all it said was “Meet me outside in ten minutes.” I looked up, but he was gone. I finished my coffee, but my appetite had suddenly vanished. I decided to walk out

front of the mess hall and see if I could see him. As I walked through the door, this staff sergeant was just standing there. He was about my height of six feet, weighed 190 pounds, and was as black as night—one of the first negro staff NCOs I'd seen.

"Who are you, and what do you want with me?" I asked as I came up on him.

"My name is SSgt. Jeremy Williams, and I have a few questions for you," he said, sticking out his hand, which I did not accept.

"Okay, but what do you want?" I asked, just staring into his eyes, which seemed as black as he was.

"I understand from reliable sources that you now work for Commander Damon. Is that right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who is Commander Whatever?" I tried to sound as if I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Okay, I understand. You don't know me from no one, and you don't trust me. I understand that too. I just need you to listen to me. I used to work for the commander a couple of years ago, and everything was great until one time I was assigned to go to Columbia and take out someone of high rank in the government. Well, things went south, and I just got out of there by the skin of my teeth. It wasn't my fault that it didn't go well, but the commander hung me out to dry. He blamed me for everything and made sure nothing came back on him. I'm just telling you that he's no good, and he'll fuck you the first time things go wrong." He had a sincere look on his face.

"I still don't know what you're talking about. I don't know the commander. I've never left the states, and I'm just back from Camp Lejeune, and I probably will go to Quantico and be on the shooting team. Why do you think I'm who you think I am?" I was trying to find out how he knew that I worked for the commander.

"Again, I understand why you're not talking. I know that you have worked with Sean Callahan on two projects, and you are waiting to go on another mission. I still have friends, and they have kept close

tabs on you. I'm just trying to warn you because no one warned me, and I almost lost everything. I could have gone to Leavenworth or even worse. I could have been killed either in Columbia or on my way back. If you'd like to talk, I'm the staff NCO in communications here at HQMC. I know you'll ask the commander about me, and that's fine. But before you believe everything he says, come talk to me and my friends again." He turned and walked off.

I just stared after him and wondered what the fuck was going on. Who the hell was this guy? Was he full of shit, or did he really have something important to tell me about the commander? Should I tell the commander about him, or should I meet with his people before I see the commander? A lot of questions to be answered, and I really didn't think the commander would answer a lot of them. Maybe I should talk with Josey first. He seemed to be an honest guy and we got along great in Boston. I wish I could get in touch with Sean. I believed he'd known who this guy was and what he did for or to the commander. The only trouble being was that Sean was on his way to Cuba, and there was no way I could get in touch with him. I'd have to ask the commander.

I drove over to Langley and went to the commander's office on the third floor, and I saw Ms. Gordon and again.

"Is he expecting you, Corporal Coleman?" She seemed surprised to see me.

"I need to speak with him right away. Tell him it has to do with the Black Ford Fairlane," I said urgently.

She got up from her desk and went and knocked on his office door and then stepped in. About fifteen seconds later, she came out and signaled me to come to the office. As I approached, she went back in a few feet and said, "Corporal Coleman, sir."

"Come in, Jim. Have a seat. Now what's this about the Ford Fairlane. What new information do you think you have?"

"It's not the Fairlane, sir. I was having breakfast this morning in the mess hall, and this colored staff sergeant came up and sat down

at my table. He knew my name, and he asked if I worked for you. He knew that I'd been on two assignments, but I don't think he knew where. Then he asked me to meet him outside, which I did." I stopped to catch my breath, and that was the opening the commander needed to start to interrogate me.

"What the hell are you talking about? What was this staff sergeant's name? What else did he have to say?"

"Well, I was about to tell you, but you cut in. His name is SSgt. Jeremy Williams, and he said he used to do the same thing for you that I'm doing. He also said that he was on a mission in Columbia, which went wrong, and you tried to hang him for it. He almost landed in federal prison, and the last thing he said was to not trust you." I stopped, took a breath, and waited for the onslaught.

"Well," he started very calmly. "I've never heard of a Jeremy Williams, whether a staff sergeant or not, and I have never had a mission in Columbia. You can check that out if you'd like. What else did this Ni, eh, colored Marine have to say? Did he say he was the one following you this past week? Did he say anything about Cuba? Did he say where he was from or worked?" he was still talking very calmly, which to me was getting scary.

"He said he was the staff NCO in communications at HQMC. He knows that I've worked with Sean Callahan on two projects, and that I'm waiting to go on another mission. He has friends, and he wants me to come talk to them. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Not a fucking thing," his voice started to go up. "I'll bet he's not even in the Marine Corps, but what agency does he work for, and what do they want? I'm going to do some checking around. So why don't you go down to the cafeteria and get some coffee and give me about an hour to see if I can find out what the hell is going on?" He got up from his desk and walked to the door. He opened it and told me he'd see me in an hour.

I went down to the basement of his building to the cafeteria and got some coffee. I was going to get something to eat, but I was too

wired to eat. The way I felt, I knew I'd spill something on my uniform. I sat there and started to read the *Washington Post* to pass the time, and the headlines read, "Vietnam Escalating. War Emanate" I proceeded to read the story, but halfway through, Ms. Gordon came to my table and said the commander needed to see me right away.

"He's not in the Marines. He's with the office of Naval Intelligence, or as they like to say, ONI. And he's trying to find out what you are doing with me!" the commander yelled as I walked back into his office.

"What does the ONI want with me? Don't you people work with one another? With me being TDY with the CIA, is that against some law that the ONI is investigating? And don't tell me not to worry about this because it's my ass that they are looking at, and I don't want to end up in Leavenworth or even worse." Now I was getting a little rattled.

"I was going to tell you not to worry because you're not doing anything wrong because you haven't done anything under the CIA authorization within the United States borders, have you?" He winked at me, so I guessed he hadn't forgotten Baton Rouge. "The ONI is just nosing around, trying to find out stuff that really doesn't concern themselves. You asked if we worked with one another? Well no, we don't, and the reason being is that the CIA is the premier department in the government. We deal with problems all over the globe. The ONI deals with problems within the Naval Department and with their military personnel, which you are one. Now a red flag went up when you were put on numerous TDYs, and in your record, there wasn't a clear reason for this. Now they want to know why.

"My director whom I just got off the phone with is going to call the head of the ONI and get him to back off. Believe me, Jim. This happened to me when I first came to the CIA as the liaison from the military, not just the Navy. They can't stand to have one of their personnel doing something legit, and they know nothing about it. Just keep on doing what you're doing, and you'll be out of here in a

couple of days. By the way, the two men who spoke with Linda and her parents were also ONI. Why they said they were from the FBI is beyond me, but I guess they didn't want me to know then that the ONI was looking into you. Again, there is nothing to worry about. When you go back to HQMC and you run into him again, try to lead him on, but for god's sake, do not let them know we are on to them. Okay?" He smiled that weasel smile that he would usually do when it seemed he was hiding something.

I left his office, and I got into my car and started out of the driveway and back to HQMC. But as I turned to go to the highway, the Black Ford Fairlane was there. To be true, I wasn't at all surprised. I got on the highway, and I did what Josey did. I went a few miles on the highway and then got off and drove the side roads and then back on, and they followed me all the way. This time, they really didn't hide the fact that they were following me, and I really didn't hide the fact that I knew it. It was supposed to snow in the DC area tonight, so I was anxious to get back to the headquarters. I didn't really have any idea exactly when I was leaving. I pulled into the parking lot, found a space and parked, and then got out and walked through Henderson Hall and then into the barracks where I went to my room to remove my uniform.

While still in HQMC, you had to wear a uniform, but it didn't have to be a formal one. It could be utilities, so I changed out of my greens and put on my utility trousers with a white T-shirt and my black boots and walked down to the mess hall. I was going to go to the NCO Club, but that meant that I'd have to wear my greens, and I had them on all day. I just wanted to relax, and anyway, the food in the general mess wasn't that bad. After dinner, I decided to go for a walk, and even if it was cold, I needed to get out for at least five minutes by myself and just think of all the shit that was happening. I walked around the perimeter of HQMC on a walkway. When I got back, I discovered that it took me almost an hour to cover all that distance, and I was really cold. As I came into the barracks, the NCO on duty told me that I had a phone call, and I was to call the person back no matter what time it was. I

took the note and read it. It was from the commander, and it said, "Call back immediately. Any time. Urgent. C."

I found a phone that was out of the way, and I called him. It rang for about six times, and then I heard, "Jim. That you?"

"Yes, sir. What's so urgent? I thought the NCO on duty was going to have a heart attack because you said urgent."

"Stop the chatter and listen. I can only repeat this once, and don't ask any questions. ONI is going to have you confined to base pending an investigation. We need to get you out of there before this happens, and it should be coming down within the hour. I need for you to get your equipment for the trip to the Caribbean, along with your seabag, and drive your car to my office. If you can't get off the base, then you need to call me right away, and we will make other plans. Now go and good luck." He hung up immediately.

I decided to go to the NCO on duty and see if he acts a little strange toward me. I went up and said, "Any other calls pertaining to me or for me, Corporal?"

"Nothing, Sergeant, but they are sending over a couple of SPs from ONI to make sure you stay on the base. Thought you'd like to know," he said with a smile.

"When did they call?"

"Right after you came in. Sounds kind of serious. Anything I can do to help you out? What do the squids want with you?" he now sounded real earnest in his response.

"Just your typical misunderstanding. My wife is down from Boston this past week because I'm being transferred to the West Coast, and we went out to dinner and then went dancing. Went into a club in DC, and there were a bunch of Navy types there who had been drinking. One of them said something off color to my wife, and words turned into punches. One of the squids ended up in the hospital. ONI wants to question me and possibly press charges. I'm supposed to go to Pendleton tomorrow, and if I can get there, everything should blow over."

“Well, the last time I had someone confined to quarters, they had someone in the barracks at the door and someone outside near the gate. I really don’t know how you’re going to get out of here, but I’ll help in any way. I just can’t stand Navy personnel. They come off like they are better than everyone, and that just rubs me the wrong way no matter what—you are right and they’re wrong.”

Sometimes I hated to lie to a fellow Marine. But if he was going to help me get out of there, then I’ll tell him anything I can think of, and to say so myself, it did sound pretty real. The corporal stuck his hand out and said his name was Donnie Mahar. He was from Albany, New York, and he just came in from Guantanamo Bay. Maybe I should have told the truth where I was going instead of Pendleton, but I think Donnie would have helped me if I said I was going to the moon. I went back to my room and grabbed my seabag, which I had packed before I went to chow, and came back to where Corporal Mahar was stationed.

“Do you think they’re here yet?” I asked, looking out the window to see if there was any movement.

“No, they usually come in here first and then dispatch the SPs to the different places. Where’s your car? That’s going to be the problem—trying to get you out in the car through the gate. If they stop there first, you’re fucked.” Truer words had never been spoken.

“I’m going to put my seabag in the trunk of my car anyway. If they get me, then I’ll just go and get it, and if I get away, I’ll buy all new stuff and have my wife pick up the car.”

“Sounds like a plan. Where is your wife now?”

“She’s at the Twin Bridges Marriott Motor Hotel on Lee Highway in Arlington. Why?”

“Well, if you get caught and they take you away, I can drive your car over to where your wife is. Then she can take me back here. This way, they won’t be able to confiscate your car or impound it. Just give me her name, and I’ll call her and explain everything that’s happening. If you get away, then I still can take your car there. What do you think?”

I want to trust him, but how do I know he won’t rifle my car

and then try to sell it to someone. He seems like a good guy, and he volunteered to help me, even before he knew I had a car. I nodded, picked up my seabag, and headed for the parking lot. When I got to the car, I looked around a couple of times, but I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. So I opened the truck, took out my haversack, and put my seabag in. I put the haversack on and then went back into the barracks. The corporal wasn't at his desk, so I grabbed his phone and dialed the commander.

"Things here are starting to get a little weird. The corporal on duty says that OCI has called, and they are going to send a few SPs to guard the gate and the barracks. I put my seabag in the car, and I have the rifle and stuff in my haversack on my back. I'm going to leave a key to the car with the corporal on duty in the barracks, but I'd send someone over here right away to get it before the SPs do. I'm going to try to get out of here by going over the fence at the back of this base. I don't know what street it's on, but if you have one of the Galaxys there and have the emergency lights on, then I'll know it's you." I hung up when I saw the corporal coming around the corner right by the pogeys bait machine.

"Who did you call?" he was not sounding too friendly this time.

"I called a buddy of mine in Quantico, and he's coming up now to get my car. He knows Linda, and she won't feel so shook up if he brings it to her. I really appreciate the offer, but he owes me. Will you hold the key for him? He should be here within the next hour. His last name is Damon. I really appreciate everything you're doing for me, and if there is any chance that I can repay the favor, then I'm there." We shook hands, and I gave him the key to my car.

Just as I was about to go out the back door, Mahar says to me, "what's with the haversack? You didn't have that on you a few minutes ago."

"Just a few things that I'll need on my trip to Pendleton. I also have my orders in here, and I need to get to NAS Oceana in Virginia really quick so I don't miss my flight at noon tomorrow. Again, thanks for everything, and hopefully, we'll see each other again. I owe you a few

beers. Semper Fi.”

“Best of luck. I’ll try to stall them as long as I can.”

I’d never really had a best friend or even a close friend, but I bet Corporal Donnie Mahar from Albany, New York, could definitely be my best friend.

As I started for the back door, he yelled out, “Hey, Sarge! They’re at the front gate, so that means they’ll be here at any moment.”

“Thanks, Donny. See you when I see you.” I ran to the back door but opened it slowly. As I was going through the door, I looked behind me, and I could see Mahar talking to a couple of SPs. I got out of there just in time, but now I needed to get to the back fence and over without being seen.

“Stop. Shore Patrol. Stop there!”

I could hear shouting from the side of the barracks as I ran across the drill area and then the parade ground with the SPs right behind me. I got on the other side and dashed around one of the buildings and then left around another one. I checked the doors on the second building, and the third door I tried was open. I dashed in and locked it behind me. The area was dark but a red light around a fire alarm.

I went over by one of the windows that was looking out on the parade ground and knelt down. The windows had venetian blinds, and they were half shut. So it made it a little easier to look out, but the SPs would have trouble seeing anything inside. I looked around to make sure my shadow could not be seen from the outside, and then I looked out. They were right in front of me, and my heart almost stopped. I never thought they were that close. They came to the window and started to peer in, and I could hear them talking.

“Where the fuck do you think that son of bitch ran to?” the one on the left said.

“He’s got to be in one of these buildings. He ran around that building back there like the devil was after him. You go back to look if you can get into that building, and I’ll check this one out. If you can

get in, yell out, and I'll come over to you. You don't want to do this alone. Remember what we were told. He's an expert marksman, and he doesn't miss. They also said he's a stone-cold killer."

That last part took me by surprise. What did they mean "he's stone-cold killer?" *I'm not a stone-cold killer, and where did they get the idea that I am? I don't even have a pistol or rifle. Well, I really do. It's pointed at them, or would I?* They were on my side or at least they were US Military Police. I knew they were trying to catch me, but they were on my side. Sometimes the fights I had with myself were not worth it. I'd got to get out of here, but first, I had to call the commander and tell him what was going on.

I started to crawl to the other side of the room, but there was no phone. The hallways were dark, but the Fire Exit sign was lit and seemed like giving off light like the Boston Garden. I still crawled down the hallway, and I was going to try every door until I found one that wasn't locked or if I couldn't find any, I'd break into one. The first door I came to was unlocked, and I crawled in. It was on the inside of the building, so there were no windows that I'd have to worry about. I found a phone at the inner office, and I dialed the commander. However, the response said I needed a code for an outside line. What code?

I decided to look around first rather than risk calling the operator and then wondering why I was calling from a closed office. I looked around the desk and drawers to see if I could find a code. I even looked under the phone itself but could find nothing. I noticed on the desk a nameplate that said Lt. Col. Aubrey Winfield and started to think about calling the operator and pretending I was him, but then why wouldn't I know the code? Well, I had to do something because these SPs weren't going to stay outside forever, and I needed to get out of here or risk the chance of being caught. I decided I'd try.

"Operator. This is Colonel Winfield, and I need an outside line," I said in a really grumpy voice.

"Yes, sir. Right away."

I heard the dial tone, and I dialed the commander's line. It rang for almost five minutes, but I couldn't hang up because I'd have to call the operator again. That would cause a problem, even if I did have someone else to call, which I didn't. I was just about to hang up when an unfamiliar voice came on the line.

"This is Commander Damon's office. Ensign Nathan speaking, may I help you?"

"Ensign Nathan, this is Sergeant Coleman. Is the commander around tonight, or can you get in touch with him right away?" I was whispering but trying to side like this is life or death.

"I know you who you are, Sergeant. The commander isn't in, but I'm sure I can get in touch with him right away. Do you want to leave a message, or have the commander call you? Is there something wrong, Sergeant? You're whispering." I wish he'd stop talking and let me get what I had to say out.

"Ensign, I'm in serious trouble, and I need the commander or one of his people to get me out of this right away. I'm hiding in one of the offices at HQMC, and I got a bunch of SPs trying to arrest me. The commander knows all about this, and he's the only one who can get me out of here. The big problem is that I don't know when I can get out of this building and get to the back fence, but if he calls or you can get in touch with him, tell him I'll be there as we discussed and for him not to leave unless he sees me in cuffs. Get that to him right away. Thanks for the help. Got to run." I hung up when I heard on the phone some kind of strange noise like someone was listening to me.

I knew that I didn't have much time before the SPs came to this building and started a sweep, looking for me. I went back out into the hall and started to crawl toward the back exit, but before that, I needed to find a window so I could see outside. The last room on the right was open, and I crawled in. Again, the windows were covered by blinds, but this time, they were wide open. I could see out, and the SPs could see in. I crawled toward the window and peeked out as much as

I could. The reason I was doing this was to see how far the buildings were to each other and also how long the building next to the one I was in was because they were both the same. If possible, I could get to the roof and try to get down to the ground from the outside.

I crawled out of the room and turned left and headed for the exit with the bright red-light overhead. When I got to the door, I put my ear to it and listened to see if anyone was on the other side or if they were coming in from the outside. I heard nothing, so I started to open it very slowly. I waited for a few seconds and listened again. There was nothing, so I stood up and ran up the stairs toward the roof. When I hit the fourth floor, I decided I'd go onto the floor and go into one of the offices on the right and look out the window and see what was going on, if I could see anything. I walked all the way down to the fifth door on my right and second from the end and opened it and went to the windows, which had blinds, but were opened. I peered out the window. I could see all the way to the gate, and there were two SPs there with the regular contingent of MPs.

We started out with two SPs chasing me, but I had no idea how many more had been added or if any had been. I couldn't see straight down, so if they were hugging the wall down below, I wouldn't be able to see them. But I did see one at the end of the building just standing there with a night stick in his hand. It looked as if he was just standing by the door, just guarding it. I sat down against the wall and started to think of what I was going to do. If I went on the roof, I would be cut off from all the exits in the building. If I stayed in the building and tried to get out one of the exits, then I would have a confrontation with one of the SPs, and I didn't really know how big they were and if they were carrying weapons outside of the night sticks.

I then had a thought, and if it worked like I hoped it would, the SPs would vacate their watch over this building and move to the building I wanted them to. I quickly walked out of the room and went toward the exit and proceeded up to the roof. As I got to the roof, I knew that I had to be as quiet as I could because they could hear noise from down

below. The roof was a tar roof, but it had stones on top of the tar. All Marine Corps buildings are made like this, and this is exactly what I wanted. I moved to the far end away from where the SPs were down below and picked up three stones and held them in my right hand. The distance from the next building to me was about twenty-five yards, and when I was in high school, I was a pretty fair baseball player with a good arm.

I looked at all the windows and thought how pissed the maintenance people were going to be on Monday morning with their windows smashed out. Just then, I threw the stones. What a terrible noise. All three stones found their mark, and all three windows came crashing down. As the noise started to subside, the two SPs ran over to the building to see what made such a racket. As they ran their way, I was flying down the stairs and running down the hallway on the bottom floor. I stopped, slowly opened the door, saw no one near, and quickly ran out into the black night and toward the back fence. I could hear yelling, and then out of the blue from about twenty feet away, I heard "Halt, who goes there?" from right behind me. I immediately hit the ground and didn't move.

Fortunately, it was pitch black—no moon, no clouds, and I had dark clothes on. Again, I heard the same voice, "Halt, who goes there?" The voice hadn't moved from the original shout, and I was lying there in his path.

Thoughts ran through my head during that situation, and the days and weeks of training started coming to the service of my mind. *Now let's see how this Recon training you went through works*, I started thinking to myself. I was on the grass with a few leaves, but they were wet due to the night cold air. I started to crawl on my belly toward the wooded area.

Again, "Halt, who goes there?"

I assumed that he had no idea where or who I was, but he was going to keep yelling out, thinking he was scaring me and I'd give up. This one was not familiar with Marines. Slowly I kept crawling toward

the wooded area, approximately forty yards to go.

Again, "Halt, who goes there?" But he had moved, and now there were two of them.

"You go left, and I'll go right. I know he's out there somewhere, but I can't see a damn thing. Neither can he, so we're in the same boat." The one who'd been yelling said to his partner.

"Are you sure he's still there? How can you tell? You know this guy is a Recon Marine, so if he doesn't want to be caught, he's not going to be. I think we should call for more men."

"Remember what the chief said? He's a suspected killer. He said we need to be very careful and cautious with this guy because he's a Recon Marine, and he's a trained assassin."

"But he also said that he hasn't done anything that can be proved, and that the ONI just wants to talk to him, under no pressure," the second SP said to the first.

Now why would they go into a big silique about me? Wouldn't they both know what was said at the meeting and heard the chief say those things. They were trying to get me to just stand up and walk out, thinking that they just want to talk to me. *Clever! But not clever enough.* I started to crawl ever so slowly toward the trees.

It must have been an hour before I got to the woods, but just as I was about five yards away, a foot came within three feet of my face. I held my breath and didn't move a muscle. He was just standing there, probably looking around and trying to see anything that moved. I couldn't see his face because mine was buried in the grass and dirt. I stayed that way for about ten minutes until he started to move. I lay there, thinking that if he kicked me, I would have to take him down as quietly as I could. I must not hurt him, just put him to sleep. That never happened because he started to move out toward my feet and missed kicking my leg by inches. I waited a few minutes until I knew he was far away, and then I got up in a crouch and scooted to the woods and toward the fence.

As I was approaching the fence, I could see SP jeeps going up

and down the street, but I couldn't see any Galaxy or any other car with their emergency lights on. There were a number of trees hugging the fence line, so I stayed inside the tree line and walked up toward Eighth Street. Then I saw it—a black 1964 Ford Galaxy. It was the most beautiful sight I'd seen in a long time. Now to get over the fence without being seen from either side of the fence, I went as far as I could away from the streetlights. Before I started to climb the barbed wire fence, I noticed on the top was a row of razor wire. I remembered we had this type in Recon training down in Lejeune, and the thing you did was throw your utility jacket over it.

After taking off my utility jacket, I started up the fence, and halfway up, I threw my jacket over the razor wire and continued up. I lifted my left leg very gently over the wire and put it on the top of the fence right under the razor wire. Then I pulled my right leg up, and as I jumped down, I grabbed my jacket. I landed rather softly and didn't make much of a noise. I waited for a few seconds to make sure the SP jeeps weren't coming down the street. When I saw they weren't, I ran across the street, and bending over, I ran toward the person who was driving the Galaxy who had already started the engine. I jumped in the back seat, and the car started out even before I could shut the door.

"Good evening, Sergeant." It was Josey driving the car, and talking like this was an everyday experience.

"Where the hell is the commander? He doesn't even want to get his hands dirty, does he?" I was exhausted, pissed off, and extremely grateful to Josey for picking me up. "Where are we going now?"

"Have to get you to Naval Air Facility at Andrews right away. There's a private plane waiting for you to take you to Haiti. You'll meet Sean Callahan there, and then you'll make your way to Cuba. I've retrieved your seabag, and it's on its way to Andrews also. The commander will meet you at the plane and fly with you to Haiti. Are you hurt at all with all the stuff you've just been through?"

I thought that Donnie Mahar, the corporal in the barracks who helped detain the SPs, would be my best friend, but I must say that

Josiah Simon after tonight should be my number 1 friend.

“No, I’m all right. That was a little crazy but a lot of fun also. I wonder why they only had four SPs because they could have used a lot more.” I felt I wasn’t bragging but just stating an obvious fact. I did think to myself that the Recon training that I went through in Camp Lejeune really did work.

It was ten miles from where we were to the facility at Andrews, but Josey decided to take every side road and back track as he could. I knew the commander and his team were very cautious, but to take an hour to drive ten miles was a little ridiculous.

As we were approaching the facility and about two miles out, Josey pulled over to the side, halfway into the woods and said to me, “You have to get in the trunk. We’re not sure the ONI hasn’t sent out warnings about you, and I’d hate for you to be apprehended before you got to the plane. The commander would not be happy.” He smile.

Now I was not a huge man, but I’m six feet tall, 165 pounds, and the trunk of a Ford Galaxy was not made for men to ride in the trunk. The last time I was in a car trunk was when we used to sneak into the drive-ins. As we approached the gate, Josey yelled for us to be quiet and to not move around.

“Good evening, sir. ID and registration for this vehicle, please.” The MP on the gate was overly friendly at this late time of the night.

I could hear some rumbling for papers and then a long pause and then, “Thank you, Lieutenant Simon. Do you know where you’re going, or may I over some direction?” Now I know that the MP wasn’t a Marine. He was too friendly and asked too many questions. Much, much too nice.

Josey said, “I think it’s to the right and straight for about a mile. Am I right, Sergeant?”

“Right as rain, Lieutenant. Have a good evening, sir.” And the car started up again, and we were driving on a cement road with bumps every ten feet. It reminded me of the New York State Thruway. The car came to a stop, and about ten seconds later, the trunk opened. It took

me a few seconds to get used to the light, and as I was getting out, I saw the commander standing in the hatch of the plane.

“Hurry up. We need to get out of here. Don’t waste any time.”

Oh, how I don’t miss that voice.

Josey came and helped me with my seabag, and I was walking toward the plane when he said, “Jim, good luck in what you’re about to do. Stay healthy and come back safe. I’ll see you in a couple of months.” He shook hands with me. Yes, he definitely would be my number 1 friend.

As I walked up the small ramp and through the hatch, the commander was standing there. I stopped, and he said, “Everything all right? Did you have to hurt anyone tonight?”

“No. If you’re asking if I killed someone, of course not, but one of the SPs said something that I found very disturbing. I’m a killer?”

“Who said that, and how do you know it was said?” he asked as we walked to our seats.

“When I was lying on the ground right at the SP’s feet. He was talking to the other one, and I think they were trying to psych me that there was nothing wrong with what their boss had said to them. That I am a suspected killer, and I’m dangerous?” I added that just to see what he’d say.

“I don’t know where they’re getting these things. The ONI is investigating you because you’ve been on TDY for more than half the time you’ve been in the Corps. That’s all they have. They don’t even know that you’re working for us, and they will never know. Now when you get back from Cuba, everything is going to be cleaned up, and we’ve decided that you’ll go back into the everyday hum drum of the Marine Corps. But first, I have to tell you the plans that we discussed have been drastically changed. Because of the ONI and the DOD or I should say the National Security Agency or NSA getting their noses into your business, we are stepping up the mission. We are going to land in Haiti where you’ll connect with Sean Callahan, and then you two will take a boat to Cuba. You’re not going to Guantanamo Bay

right away. You'll meet up with the Cuban freedom brigade and find out if it's possible to take care of your mission right away. If not, we'll have to reconsider what we are doing and to see when the right time will be. If we are going to be put on hold, then you will report to Gitmo for duty and wait to see what happens."

"What about these people who are looking for me?"

"By the time if and when you report to Guantanamo Bay, all your troubles with the ONI will be in the past. Believe me that we have people already working on this. This is what we do, so don't worry a thing about it and get ready for takeoff." We both sat down in seats that were opposite each other.

The flight to Haiti didn't seem that long, and before we knew it, the pilot was saying to get seated and ready for landing. As we landed, we taxied to the far end of the airport and into a very large hanger. As we were towed in, the big doors of the hanger started to shut, and within a few minutes, everything was black until the overhead lights came on. The flight crew put down the stairs, and we exited rather quickly. Right in front of me when I got off the plane was Sean Callahan with his big Irish smile. He gave me a big bear hug and then turned and shook hands with the commander. He then leaned down, scooped up my seabag, and started toward a door at the back of the hanger.

"We'll leave by the back and go around to this house that I've rented for the week. It's on the far side of the beach, and this is where we'll leave for Cuba. It's so isolated that I haven't seen one person since I came here five days ago. It's getting dark now, so this is the perfect time for us to get out of here."

As we drove, the commander told me how this mission has changed. "We are no longer looking at Castro. The higher-ups feel that this would not be a political advantage for us to take him out, and the only one who would take his place would be his brother, Raul, who may be worse. You know the old adage, 'The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.' And this fits really well."

"Okay, if Castro isn't the target, then why am I going to Cuba?" I

was a lot confused.

"I'm getting to that. There is a Russian general who is charge of training the Cuba militia and is also in charge of the Russians stationed in Cuba. He is a fast riser in the army, and he's only thirty-three years old. We have found that a lot of the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (love to see that on a business card) have strong feelings that they are afraid of him, and he should be taken care of immediately."

"Wouldn't this cause a lot more problems for our country shooting a Soviet general rather than killing a confirmed scumbag?" I knew as I said this that this was not part of my MOS. I'm hired to shoot, not think.

"Not your concern. You're not here to think, just to shoot." I knew he was going to say this.

"I'm just saying that if they are sure he's the one, so be it. But I would hate to be ready to go, and then they change their minds. That's all I'm saying." I was a lot more concerned, and my feelings had been hurt by that statement.

"Again, don't worry about it. As far as I know, it's a go, and there won't be any minds being changed because a lot of the people you'd think would know what's going on don't," he was very emphatic about the last few words.

As he was finishing his sentence, the car took a quick right and then a quick left, and we slid from one end to the other on the car seats. Sean took another quick right and went about two hundred yards and stopped. Here stood a pretty little house right on the beach. Four men were walking around the perimeter with automatic weapons who I assumed were Sean's personal little protective army.

"We're here. What do you think of the place, Commander?" Sean asked with a lot of pride.

"Not bad, but it's out in the open, and your guards are standing out like sore thumbs. By the way, what's this costing me?" He would never tell someone he did a good job, no matter what his philosophy.

“Not as much as you think and a little more than you’d want to pay.” Nothing would get by Sean.

As we approached the house, you could see the clear water in the Caribbean, and I couldn’t wait to go swimming. The commander said that we would have a briefing within ten minutes. After getting our bags set in our rooms and grabbing a cup of coffee, we headed to the living room for the meeting.

The commander started, “Now that we have established who and I think we also know the why, let’s learn a little more about who. Leonid Ivanovich Zakharchenko is a colonel general in the Russian army, and he’s a brigade commander. The rank of colonel or even general are the ones who usually command a brigade, but because of what this is and where this is at, the Russians have decided to send Colonel General Zakharchenko to take charge of the three thousand soldiers in the Russian brigade and oversee the training of ten thousand men and women in the Cuban militia, and he is the number 1 enemy of the United States residing in Cuba.

“As a general in the Second World War, he was responsible for the defense of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942. He had the Soviet army congregate on both sides of the city as the German Panzer army and Romanian armies started bombarding the city and moving forward. On November 19, he had the two Soviet fronts punch through the Romanian lines and converged at Kalach, and on November 23, he trapped three hundred thousand German and Romanian troops behind them. It was the start of the end for the Nazis, and Zakharchenko was given all the credit for this daring maneuver. He quickly rose in the Stafka, and when the Korean War broke out in 1950, he was sent to Pyongyang, North Korea, with a regiment of Russian troops—mostly pilots to help stabilize the North Korean People’s Air Force and Army.

“As the conflict seemed to be going the US and UN way, the Stafka recalled him to Moscow. He then turned up in Cuba in 1955 as an associate of Che Guevara, second in command to Castro. He then went back to the Soviet Union, but again, he appeared in Cuba during

the missile crisis. He has built the Cuban militia into one fine fighting group, and it is reported that he is trying to convince the Soviet Union to establish a military base in Cuba, such as the one the United States has in Guantanamo Bay. This just must not be done, and this is why the target has changed.”

“How easy is he to get to?” was the first question that I could think of and the most relevant.

“Not that easy. Fidel would probably be easier. But it’s possible, and believe me, it’s not a suicide mission,” the commander stated very frankly.

Just then, as he said suicide, I thought of Linda. I really hadn’t thought that much of her since we left the mainland, and for some reason, suicide kicked it in for me. I needed to talk to her because I hadn’t spoken with her in over forty-eight hours, and I really didn’t want her to worry more than she was already.

“Where is he based, or will we wait till he’s on the go as we were going to do for Fidel?”

“He really doesn’t move around that much, but anytime that Fidel speaks to a huge crowd in Havana, he always seems to be there. You know he must show the support of the Soviet Union. Fidel has a huge speech scheduled on March 2. It will be the International Women’s Day in Russia, and Zalharchenko had convinced Castro that he should have Cuba celebrate this also as many of the satellite countries do. So he will be in the baseball stadium at the center of Havana, and there will be a huge army surrounding the whole area.

“This must be worked out to a tee before you leave here for Cuba, and we only have ten days to do this. We must go over all the entrances and exits into the city and how quickly this can be done. But one thing is the most important thing: You must assure yourself and everyone else that Zalharchenko is dead. No mistakes and no misses.” He was quite emphatic about the last statement.

“I don’t miss,” I said a little more emphatic than he did.

“I know you don’t, but if something goes wrong and they can prove

the US was behind the attempt, then this could lead to World War III. It has to be done quickly and as quietly as possible. If we can get to him before he enters the stadium, it would probably be better, but one place is as good as another if we can stop him cold." The "we" thing didn't get by me this time, but I thought I'd let it go because I didn't need him in my throat during this. I needed a favor from him, and that being me contacting Linda.

He said that we could have the rest of the day off to enjoy the beach or anything else we wanted to do within the confines of this beach front. But first thing in the morning, we would start, and it was going to last most of the day for the next ten days.

After a great day of relaxing and just going into the night, I went to find the commander to see if he would allow me to call Linda.

"No" was his answer. No rhyme or reason, just one word, and then he turned and walked away.

What the fuck was that? I said to myself, just shaking my head. I knew when he was in a mood like this, I shouldn't press him, or he'd really get angry. God knows what would come next.

The following morning, we were all up at 0600 and showered. We had a big breakfast, and then with my usual cup of coffee in my right hand, we entered one of the bedrooms that had been changed into a small office with a table at the left corner with four chairs around it. Why four chairs when there were only the three of us involved? The commander then came into the room accompanied by Umberto Rodriguez, the Cuban freedom fighter.

Before we started, the commander came up to me and said, "I'm sorry about yesterday, but I can't afford, or I should say you can't afford, for any outside agency to know where you are. I know Linda wouldn't say anything to any stranger, but I also know she tells her folks everything. With this mission at full steam ahead, no one may be contacted until it's over. Is that understood by everyone?" He seemed to include Sean, but I thought that was to just appease me into thinking

he also had someone that he'd like to contact, but we all knew he didn't.

He pulled out three files, and he said that these were all the same. So what was in Sean's page 6 would be the same in mine on page 6. We opened the file, and on page 1 was a picture of a man in a Russian army uniform with scores of medals on both chests and one of those huge uniform covers that the Russians wear. This was Col. Gen. Leonid Ivanovich Zalharchenko, commander of the Russian detachment that was now residing in Cuba and had been for over a year.

The commander was the first to speak, "Gentlemen, this is the target. Look at his face and study it. Learn every nook and cranny. Learn the scars, the ears, nose, mouth, and hair line. Jim, you need to know everything about this face as you know your own. This is the only face that will tell you if it's the real general or a substitute. Now we have never seen his substitute, a look-alike, as Castro does, but there is always a chance. The only problem with the general is that he has many unusual habits. He does smoke a lot, and he drinks a lot of vodka. But no one has ever seen him tipsy, let alone drunk. He does keep to himself, and he hardly goes out on his own to dinner or a club. He's a loner, and that's the problem with this mission. The only chance we will have to get him will be on March 2, and looking at his future schedule, that's the only date." He took a small break for us to gather everything in what he just said.

He continued, "When he goes to this Woman's Day, he will have a full squad surrounding him. It will be made up of six men who are at least six feet four, and they will surround a man that is only five feet seven. Jim, your one shot will not be easy. But he will be on the podium with Castro, and that's when you'll have your best chance. He rides everywhere in an armored vehicle, so that's out. He has one staff assistant—Capt. Mikhail Budnikov, who has been with the colonel general for over five years. He is quite loyal, and he lives like a monk. He never associates with the other officers, and he is at the colonel general's call twenty-four hours a day. There is absolutely nothing about him that we can use. When the colonel general is obligated to

attend these functions, he usually arrives at the same time as Castro, but for this, we have no idea when he'll arrive. We do assume that he will speak because of this being a Russian holiday, and they are trying to make it a Cuban holiday."

"Do we have any information on where this stadium is and what's around it?" I asked because I just wanted to break up the negativity for a while, not knowing I was going to ask the wrong question.

"No, not too much. I'm still waiting on what surrounds the stadium, preferably what kind of buildings are on the outside of the stadium or will you two have to be on the inside to take the shot." Now that didn't sound good to anyone who was sitting at this table.

"I thought you said that this wasn't a suicide mission?" Sean finally spoke up.

"It isn't," the commander didn't sound that sure.

"Well, it sure does to me. We have no Intel on what's around the stadium or whether we have to be in the stadium to do this. Well, if that's the case, then this is a one-way trip, and there's got to be a better way."

"Sean, we are still working on this. What I want to accomplish in the next ten days is that we know the target, and we would be able to pick him out of a crowd of, say, ten thousand."

I spoke up and said, "I'll know this guy better than I know myself. I have no worries about that, but I do have some concerns about getting out of there. You don't want anyone to know who we are, but if we can't get out of there and get captured, then what you're worried about is all for not because they will know where we are from."

We went over and over for the next week just looking at the target and talking about the scar on his left cheek and him having the bottom of his left ear missing, and I was about to scream from boredom. Repetition was supposed to be the one thing that would always work in meetings like this, but after a while, the only thing both Sean and I could think of was how we were going to get out of there. We spoke almost every night about this, but the commander had no answers.

He really didn't want to talk about it.

The start of the eighth day was about to begin. I had my coffee and Sean had his tea, but neither one of us really wanted to be at this meeting. We were just about to tell the commander that we were ready, and we didn't need to keep going over the same information.

"We got new information about the stadium and what's around it. It came in last night, so let's sit down and get to it," the commander stated with a little enthusiasm.

"It seems that the national baseball stadium does not have any buildings surrounding it, but it does have one twenty-seven-story famous hotel on the third base side of the stadium. It is a deserted hotel, and it was supposed to be demolished a few years ago, but the government wants to save it, clean it up, and start using it for tourists again. It was once owned by a Los Angeles company. Now, according to fly over pictures, there are windows that overlook the stadium, but at this time, we are not sure where the stage will be. We may not know until you're in the hotel. Now I would think that there will be guards posted around this structure just for the purpose of keeping people out of there. Not because they think it will be trouble but also to stop people for going in there and looking out the windows trying to get a better seat for the ceremonies. Sean, you need to get your people in and around this building to distract any kind of guards they may have."

"What's the name of the hotel?" I asked for no particular reason, but I was just curious.

"It is called the Hotel Habana Libre, but it used to be the Habana Hilton. and it was built in 1958. It was also used as Castro's headquarters after he arrived in Havana in 1959, and he was there for about three months. Is there anything in particular that you need to know about this hotel right now?"

"Is there electricity? How do the windows open, or are there any windows? Elevators or escalators, working or not? What's the roof like, and is there a way out? Sean, have your people start working on an exit strategy. How many guards do they put out when Castro is going

to speak? No matter where he appeared, just see if they can find out how many were on the peripheral area. We will need building plans for the hotel when it was built, and we also will need the plans for sewer systems or water systems in and out of the hotel. This may be the only way out if the guards catch where we are. I have to have those plans within the next three days.”

“I’ll have them to you no later than the day after tomorrow.” I never heard Sean so positive.

“You know, Commander, this may be the best thing, having a very tall hotel there, because with the tall guards the general has, shooting down on him may be the key.”

“You know better than anyone, and if you think that gives you an advantage, great,” he didn’t sound so sure.

“One thing I need to do for the next couple of days is practice with a silencer.”

“Why are you going to use a silencer? I thought it didn’t give you a true shot, or that’s what you told me before.”

“I want to see how I am doing with it, because if I can use one on the general, that will give us an advantage because no one will see a muzzle flash or hear the shot. That way, it will give us a head start in trying to get out of there. Also, if there are guards around and we need to take them out, a silencer is the best to do that if you’re using a long rifle,” I thought I’d explained that well.

“Are you expecting to get into a shooting match with the guards?” he asked, but he knew the answer.

“I expect to get into a shooting match with anyone who gets in our way, especially if we are on our way out. Can you get some more rounds of ammo in here, please? I should be going through about a can or a can and a half by the time we leave.”

“You need that many rounds to practice?”

“Not only to practice, but it sounds as if we may need to bring a few extra magazines. Also, having a couple of cans around doesn’t hurt.” I

couldn't figure out why he was trying to fight me on this.

"I'll see what I can do, but I thought all this was supposed to be as secretive as possible. Now you're talking about a shoot-out with all the guards. I would think that was very dangerous, and you could get caught."

"I'm the shooter. That's what I want, or should I say that's what I need. I haven't fired this rifle in a very long time, and I have to make sure the sights and other things are the same as I left them." I was really starting to feel my importance.

"They'll be here by this afternoon. Is there anything else you'll need to practice with?" he sounded very sarcastic.

"No, but if I think of anything, I'll let you know." I pushed my chair away and got up and left the room without even asking permission.

As we started outside, Sean came up from behind and whispered, "How are you going to practice being on the sixth or eighth floor and looking down being on a beach?"

"I'm not. I can shoot straight at a tree, and I can tell if the silencer will affect my accuracy. I'll set up around one hundred yards down the beach and shoot at a target and see how it tracks. I know I can hit any target, but I must test for accuracy. And if there is an effect, what can I do to rectify it, or do I go without it? We'll take our chances after the shot."

After lunch, I decided I'd take a walk down the beach and start setting up my targets. I went for fifty, seventy, and one hundred yards, and I used playing cards as targets, mostly aces. I put up the ace of spades, diamonds, and hearts with the thought of not only hitting the card but also trying to put a bullet within the card and in the designator. I went back to my room and took out my Remington and put it together, and then I attached the silencer. Walking back down to the spot where I would start shooting, I started thinking of Linda again. This wasn't the kind of life for her, even after we got married. I thought I'd tell the commander that this was it for me to be working for the CIA, and that when I got married, I couldn't be doing all this stuff.

I got the rifle off my back and took the silencer out of my trousers and started to twist it to the top of the rifle barrel. It went in rather smoothly, and then I checked to make sure the sight was on nice and tight. Then I stood and sighted in on the first card at fifty yards, which was the ace of spades. I held my breath and then started slowly to let it out along while slowly squeezing the trigger. *Pop!* that was what I think it sounded like, but the recoil seemed a lot stronger before. I sighted into the card, and the bullet had hit the upper right edge of the spade design. I sighted once again, but I turned my azimuth on the rifle. One click, and I started to squeeze the trigger once more. *Pop!* went the recoil. I sighted in on the card once more, and the second bullet had gone into the spade design right in the middle. *Not bad,* I said to myself, *but let's try at seventy-five yards and see how that goes.*

I walked up the beach where I had made a mark to show where the seventy-five-yard card was. I stood there and sighted in on the tree, and I found the card and took direct aim. I held my breath and started to squeeze the trigger. *Pop!* went the rifle, and the recoil seemed to be better. But I thought it was because I was getting used to it. I sighted into the card, the ace of hearts, and saw that I had missed the design all together, but it was on the right upper part of the card. That was quite unusual, but I stood there and started to think of what I had done during the whole setting up and firing that was different than before.

I came to the conclusion that I might have jerked the trigger rather than squeezed all the way through. I pulled back the slide and put a round in and then snapped the slide forward, which put the round deep into the chamber. I looked through the scope and moved the azimuth two clicks to the right and held my breath and squeezed. *Pop!* There was no sound, but the recoil again was different. I looked through the scope, low to the left of the design, but I hit it. Now if you take the card and superimpose a head to that, then it would be a hit but not necessarily a kill shot. I placed another round into the rifle, snapped in place, and again sighted in on the playing card. I held my breath and squeezed, then *Pop!* The recoil was there but not as strong

as usual. Looked through the scope and no bullet showing. *I missed*, I thought to myself. Now there was a first for everything.

I was dumbfounded I couldn't get my head around it. I missed. I never missed. Never. I took the rifle and removed the silencer and then put another round into the chamber. I snapped it shut once again and then sighted in on the card. I held my breath, pulled the rifle as far back into my shoulder, and squeezed the trigger. Once again, *pop!* and no real recoil. I looked through the scope once more to see where the round went and nothing. Again, I had missed the target. *What the fuck is going on? I have never missed this many times in all the times I've fired any weapon.* I never missed when I was first shown how to even fire a rifle. I stopped what I was doing and started back to the house. I got on the porch, went to the table, and sat down and started to dismantle the Remington. I broke it all down, and all the pieces were on the table. I just stared at them, not really knowing what I was looking for.

Just then, Sean came out of the house and came a stood by me on the porch.

"I've got a problem with the rifle," I said to him without looking up.

"What kind of problem? Anything that can be fixed within the next couple of days?"

"I really don't know. I was out testing the rifle just trying to get back into it, and I set up some targets on trees with playing cards. I put them at fifty, seventy-five, and one hundred yards, and the first at fifty was perfect. I hit the target right through the center on the second shot, but the seventy-five yard was terrible. I hit the card but way to the left. The next two, I missed the card all together, and I didn't know why. I came back, causing the problem. I don't think it's the rifle. It could be the scope, and it is definitely not the silencer. But I just don't know what is causing me to miss."

"Jim, everyone has bad days."

"I don't!" I snapped at him. "I never miss. Never. It's got to be wrong with the rifle. I'll need a carpenter's level and some very fine sandpaper,

and I'll need them right away. Where the hell is the commander? He's my handler, and God knows I need handling right away."

"Easy, fella. I'll go see if I can find him, but in the meantime, just take it easy and relax. Getting all pissey isn't going to change anything. Look over the rifle, and maybe you can find something that's not right without all these tools that you'll want." He did have a soothing effect with that fucking accent, and he left the porch and went looking for the commander.

I picked up the scope and started looking at it and holding it up to the light. Maybe something was blocking the sight pins, but I couldn't see anything with the naked eye. I held the scope a long time, going over every inch and trying to think what has happened to this rifle since the last time I'd fired it. It was always on my back, even with the happenings in New Orleans. I had fired it since then and all the craziness in Washington, with me falling and tripping in the woods, trying to get out of there and then going over the fence and falling on my back. I then picked up the barrel and looked through the open end, but I couldn't see anything. I remembered I had seen a Zippo on the table in the living room, and I got up and went to get it. I flipped the Zippo, and the flame ignited. I held it to the far end and looked through the barrel, and the flame showed the barrel clearly.

There was something in the middle of the barrel. It was not a big thing, but something that could cause the round to go haywire. In the base of the stock underneath the medal plate were two holes that hold a cleaning kit for the Remington. I picked up the stock, flipped open the medal plate, and then turned the stock over so the cleaning tools would come out the bottom and onto the table. I picked up the cleaning rod, which was in three pieces, and attached all three. On the top was a little hook where you place the cleaning cloth too. I put some gun oil to the cloth and then put the rod down into the barrel and started pushing and pulling, trying to clean the inside of the barrel.

After I did that about ten times, I took the rod out and, again, flipped the Zippo on and put it on one end of the barrel as I looked

into the other end. There still seemed to be something in the barrel, so I started the process all over again. But this time, I decided to clean the sides as heavy handed as I could. I pushed and pulled, trying to push the cloth on the sides of the barrel, and again, I flipped the Zippo and looked in. It didn't look as it did before, but there was something in that barrel that didn't belong there. Again, I put the rod and cloth into the barrel, and again, I pushed and pulled as hard as I could. Again, I lit the Zippo and held it on one end and me looking into the other. Was it a success? No. There was still something in there. I placed the barrel on the table and sat back in my chair.

What am I going to do if I can't get that out of there? I was thinking to myself. I just sat there, and as I looked up, I could see the commander coming up the path toward the house with Sean right beside him.

"What's the problem? Sean tells me that you missed your targets this morning. You can't afford to miss your targets. You're here to hit everything. This is unacceptable. What's wrong? Is it the rifle, or is it you?" He was as red as I'd ever seen him, and he didn't look as if he was going to stop.

"I think I found the problem, and no, it's not me. There is something in the barrel."

"Then get it out!" he screamed.

"What the fuck do you think I've been doing for the past fifteen minutes, sitting here playing with myself?" I didn't care if I disrespected him because he could ask some stupid questions at always the wrong time.

"Don't you dare talk to me that way. Don't you know who you're talking too? I don't have to stand here and take this shit." He was getting redder like a blood vessel was going to explode.

"Well, stop asking stupid ass questions. Of course, I've been trying to get it out, but it won't budge. I have no idea what it is, but it's fucking up every shot I've taken. I think it's a little smaller than when I started."

"Have you tried shooting again after you've cleaned it?" It was another stupid question, but I let it go.

“No, because I was trying to get it all out, not just a part of it.”

“Well, why don’t you try firing it again at the targets and see how close you get to hitting it? Maybe you’ve taken enough off that it will work on the mission.” He seemed to have calmed down a little, but it wouldn’t last too long.

“Commander, I don’t want to have a rifle that will work just enough on a mission. I have to be able to rely on this weapon, and I have to know when the target is in the scope that this weapon will work without any problems. That it will only take one shot because that’s all I can do.” I was trying to be very honest about the whole thing.

“Well, I’m telling you to go test it again and see if it’s going to work. I don’t have time to get a new rifle here and for you to test it because you and Sean have to be in Cuba by the end of this week, and that’s only two days from now. So get off your ass, put the fucking thing back together, and go test it without one fucking word out of your mouth.” I knew he was going to blow.

“Very well, but when it doesn’t work, what are we, or should I say, you going to do then?”

“I’ll see after you’ve tested it. Now please do what I told you to do.” That was the first time he had ever said please.

“Very well.” I started to put the Remington back together, but I had left the cleaning rod in the barrel as I put everything together.

“You going to shoot with the rod in the barrel?” the commander asked in a quizzical manner.

“I’m going to try one more time before I attach the barrel to the stock, if that’s okay with you.” I could never let a smart-ass’s remark go by.

I took the rod out of the barrel and attached two pieces of cloth to the hook to make it fatter. I poured some gun oil to the cloths and started to push the rod into the barrel. It was very difficult because the cloths were very thick, and the barrel wasn’t. I finally got the rod to the end of the barrel, and then I pulled it back, which was easier than

pushing it. I repeated this for four more times, and then I pulled the rod out of the barrel. I took the Zippo, but before I could light it, the commander snapped.

“What are you doing with my lighter? You going to heat the barrel or something?”

“No. Watch.” I snapped the Zippo, so it lit. I held it down at the end, and I looked through the other end. I couldn’t see anything in the way this time. I put the barrel down and started to look into the cloths that were lying on the table.

On the edge of the cloths was a small speck that looked like a piece of a leaf, but I didn’t care because the barrel was clean, or at least I assumed it was because I couldn’t see anything else in there.

“Now what? Are you going to test it or not? Is it clear? What did you find?” he must have asked these questions over and over until I told him what I saw and what I found on the cloths. “Well, let’s go and see if this is going to work or not.”

We all left the porch after I had assembled the rifle back together. I didn’t notice when the commander came onto the porch that he was carrying two M19A1 ammunition cans, meaning that I had at least five hundred rounds to practice with. We walked down toward the trees that had the playing cards on them, and when I came to the mark I had made in the sand where the seventy-five-yard target was, I stopped and took my stance. Again, I pulled back the slide on the chamber, took a bullet, placed it in the chamber, and let go of the slide. That slammed the round deep into the chamber.

I put the silencer back on the front barrel, and then I lifted the rifle to my shoulder and looked through the scope to where I could see the ace of hearts. I sighted the target, held my breath, pulled the rifle as far back into my shoulder, and started to squeeze the trigger, then *pop!* The recoil was like all the rest, nice and easy. I stood there for a second, and then I looked through the scope, top right of the heart but in the red. It was definitely a kill shot, and I just turned to both Sean and the commander and smiled.

"See what I told you? I knew you could do it!" the commander was shouting and pounding both Sean and me at the back.

"I want to keep shooting for a couple of more hours, and then I want to shoot this evening to test it during the night without any lights. Is that okay with you, Commander?" I honestly asked the question, but I didn't think he really thought I was that sincere.

"Of course, it's okay with me. Just don't wear the rifle out," he said as honestly as he could even though that was probably the dumbest statement he ever made to me.

"Okay, I won't wear it out." I turned and winked at Sean.

I was out on the beach for the rest of the day. I would fire two rounds at each target, and then I would change the cards. Then I thought I'd play a little game while I was doing the testing. I took all the numbered cards starting at the five and would put the cards on top of each other in a straight line on the trees. So, on one tree, there would be four cards on top of each other. I did that for fifty, seventy-five, one hundred, and two hundred yards, but on the two-hundred-yard tree, I put only cards with ten on each. What I would do was fire at each suit, there being four suits; and at two hundred yards, there would be four to ten, one card of each suit.

I'd have to hit every card and every designator of the card. So, if I placed a six of clubs on one tree, I would fire at the three clubs on one side and then the three clubs on the other side. I couldn't move to the other distances until I finished hitting all the cards on the tree, and the rounds would have to go into the club directly in the middle. After I finished hitting all the cards, I decided to go get something to eat and wait for the sun to go down. Then I'd start all over in the nighttime. As lunch was being prepared by Sean's men, I sat and had a long talk with the commander, with Sean just sitting there and listening.

"Okay, Commander, let's have the straight skinny. What do you think our chances are that we come out of this alive?"

"Jim, I'm not going to lie to you or Sean. Sean knows the risks that we go through with something as hard as this looks like. You're

going to be in the heart of the city, with no protection outside of you two and a few of Sean's men, and you're going to kill the highest-ranking Russian in Cuba. There will also be Russian army security on hand, and you'll be in the one large building around. They will know where you are at almost immediately. How important is this mission? I know you'd ask, so I'm going to tell you. This is possibly the most important mission you'll ever be asked to undertake by the company. He is possibly the most dangerous Russian there is, and that includes Khrushchev. I think if they don't know what is going on within the first ten minutes of the shooting, then you have a great chance of coming back alive—if sooner, not so much."

"Have the satellite pictures of the baseball field with the hotel in the background or any pictures of the hotel which are current and not from the encyclopedia?" I wanted to get a feel of the place before we got there.

"I have pictures of the field and where they think the stage will be set, and that's going to be in center field. Now the hotel faces center field, so you should have a direct shot when you take it."

He went and got the photos, and Sean and I went over them with a magnified glass and asked each other questions over and over. We were trying to figure out where the exits were so we knew how to get in and then how to get out. I wanted to know how the windows worked. Were they sliding windows or did they raise up like regular or did they open from the bottom, meaning only the bottom of the window would go straight out, and that's the worse of the choices?

Everyone had an opinion about how the windows worked. The commander thought that they slid from left to right, and Sean thought they could open up like household windows by pull up on the bottom. However, I thought they opened at the bottom straight out, but looking at it was simply conjecture on our part.

"Did you get the building plans and the sewer plans as I asked?"

"Yes, they are right here." He brought two more big rolls of paper.

"Let's look at the building plans, and maybe they will tell us what

kind of windows they put in or were supposed to put in.” We unrolled the plans and kept turning the large paper one after another until we came to the building material page.

“There it is right there, and they give you the exit measurements also.” They were sliding windows.

“Okay, that’s that. Let’s get the sewer plans now, and we can study these for the rest of the night because, people, these plans are life or death. Sean, it’s up to you and your men to get us the hell out of there.” I started to unroll the plans.

We stayed at this for about five hours, going over every entrance and exit—where did it come out and where could we go from where we exited. We then went back to the building plans and matched them with the sewer and water plans. The only bad thing about the sewer or the water plans was it didn’t show if it was still flowing and if there was any blockage since they built them. The blockage in the sewer was one of our main concerns. If any of the routes were blocked, where would we go to get around the blockage and still come out where Sean’s people would pick us up and get us out of Havana?

The next day, I went out nice and early prior to the sun coming up and started firing my Remington again, but this time, I went further out to three hundred and five hundred yards. I used the night scope and the silencer, and everything was working just fine, getting the rounds right at the middle or a little to the left or right but good enough for a kill shot.

Departure day was coming, and as always, I started to wonder if I was ready and if we were going to get out of there. Also, I hadn’t thought of Linda at all since being here in Haiti, and that bothered me. I was glad that I was so focused on the job at hand, but I was worried that I had lost my feelings toward her. I knew deep down that I really was fond of her, and I really missed her. But I started to wonder if I really loved her as I thought I did. Not only did I take her virginity, but she had also taken mine. I thought that was something really special between us. I knew once this was over and we were back in the state,

I was going to get that leave that I was promised, and then everything would be all right.

“The commander needs to see us.” Sean was at my door and in almost a deep panic. We walked down the hall to the porch and saw the commander standing, staring out at the ocean. As we approached, he turned around, and he had this crazy look on his face.

“What’s up, Commander? We’re about ready to get going. By my calculations, tomorrow is the day that Sean and I shove off for Cuba, isn’t that correct?” He just stood there with that glassy look.

“Commander, did you hear what I said?”

“What, oh yes. I heard you, but there may not be a Cuba. I just got a word that Zakharchenko may be on his way back to Moscow. My sources in Washington are telling me that there is a possible power upheaval in the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and Khrushchev may be on his way out. That means that Zakharchenko could be called back to Moscow, and if he is, then he would be replaced.”

“Who’s going to be taking Khrushchev’s place?”

“His second in command—a Leonid Brezhnev. The two of them fought against the Germans in World War II together, and they came up in the party together. Supposed to be great friends, but I guess you never have friends when it comes to Russia or the communist party.” He took a seat at the table.

“What are you talking about? It’s not just in Russia. Look at the Republicans or the Democrats, they’re just as bad, but they don’t have people killed to get them out of power.” I was half joking, and I started to laugh.

“You laugh, but it’s not a joke. A lot of work has gone into this, and now, it’s maybe over. If he’s gone, we must scrub the mission,” the commander said with no emotion in his voice.

“Can we go back to our first target—Castro? He’s going to be at this function at the ballpark. Believe me, all I have to do is move three

clicks to the right, and he's right back in my sights." I again was half kidding, but I really wasn't.

"Not enough time. This thing is going off in nine days, on March 8, and you two are supposed to be on your way tomorrow evening and be on the beach at Varadero the first thing Sunday morning the first." I could tell the commander was still thinking of what I said.

"Like I said, three clicks to the right. I know this would be a big change, but we have nine days. Today is February 27, and we're leaving on the 28, one way or another. We really don't know whether he'll be recalled right away or he'll still be here till they replace old Nikita, but we still have a green light to proceed, don't we?"

"As far as I know and Washington has not informed me otherwise, you're still to go. Tomorrow evening, once you're on the Zodiac Milpro, the only communication you'll have is a two-way satellite radio with a range of 150 miles, but can only be used in the evening between 2200 and 0200. You'll be talking directly to me, and if something should transpire and the mission is called off, I will call you at any time of the day or night. I have those capabilities with the main radio, but you will not be able to talk to me except for those times I gave you. You must power the radio at all times, and when it's time for the mission, you must keep it on. The power pack will last for five hours, so you should have plenty of time to hear me."

"Now according to our calculations, Cuba is 397 miles from Haiti, and if we travel at 43 knots or 50 mph, we should reach Varadero in eight hours, meaning we leave here at 2100 and land there at 0500."

"Sean, your people are ready to pick us up and move us close to the baseball field?" Sean nodded his head in agreement.

"Well, Commander, it looks as if we are ready to proceed. We'll be in constant communication with you via the radio, and if anything does change, you'll notify us. So there shouldn't be any problems. One thing, I want to carry a Heckler & Koch HK54 submachine gun, with 30-06 round capacity clips."

"Why are you using an MP5 this time and you never did before?"

the commander kind of sat up for this one.

“This is going to be a little hairier than any of the other ones, and I would like to have a little more fire power than just a single shot M14.”

“I think you’re worrying a little more than you should on this mission. It’s going to be just like the others, and you have Sean’s team to get you all out. So don’t get a little crazy there and follow directions, and you’ll be fine.” But I really wasn’t buying what the commander was selling this time.

I decided to go down to the beach and relax the next day. I didn’t want to get too much sun or tire myself out by swimming. But I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts and try to go over everything that we’d been studying these past few days and try to think what I would do if this went wrong and what if we got caught. That was one idea that should never enter your head when you were doing this kind of job. I could remember our first meetings with the commander, and a question was asked. I didn’t remember if I or Joe Tomelli asked it, but it had to do with what would happen if the Vietnamese caught us.

Well, the commander went absolutely ballistic and started screaming that we never think of such a thing. Our only thoughts before, during, and after the mission should be success, and no negatives should ever enter our minds. To say the commander was a little bit superstitious was an understatement. I knew his job was really difficult because he had to put this all together, but to say we should never think bad thoughts and only think of success was kind of stupid, seeing he was going to be hundreds of miles away from the mission and the only way he’d know it was successful was if we didn’t get caught and radio him of its success.

The day went by rather slowly, and we ate lunch and dinner almost in complete silence, all for a radio that was playing the top 40 hits from Port-au-Prince. Every fifteen minutes, they would play “I Want to Hold Your Hand” by Beatles, and then they’d play some big performer from Haiti whom I had never heard of. We listened to anything, but this day, not much was being listened to because at the back of everyone’s

minds was "Are we actually going to come back from this mission?" In the late afternoon, I decided to lie down and try to get some sleep, but all I did was lie there on my bed and stare at the ceiling. I was up and dressed when the knock on my door came, and one of Sean's men said it was time to go.

I went to the living room, and the commander was sitting on the couch with the HK54 submachine gun in his lap. "Let me give you a quick instruction on how this works. You'll have a thirty-round clip that goes in here just like any other weapon with a clip and then the safety in right on trigger housing. When not firing, you can push the stock into the side of the barrel, and you carry it slung on your shoulder. When firing, the stock comes out about a foot, and you fire from your shoulder just like any other rifle." He stood and handed me the weapon and the five extra cartridges.

"You take care and make sure you contact me every evening and tell me what's going on, and I'll see you back here on the ninth or at the latest, the tenth. Make sure you keep your ass down and make every shot a success." He turned and walked out the living room door.

Sean came in and went over everything I was carrying, especially the haversack where I keep the Remington, the silencer, the night and day scope, and now the extra five clips for the HK54. After he checked my stuff, he turned, and I checked everything he had. But there was one item I didn't know he was carrying, and it kind of upset me. "What the fuck are you doing with four-hand grenades in your pack?" I was stunned.

"Just in case we get into any tight spots, and we need these to get us out."

"I don't like them, and I wish I didn't know you had them. Do me a favor. Until we arrive in Cuba, please take some duct tape, and tape the spoon to the base. That way, nothing is going to happen to us on our way to Cuba, and I will be able to relax and not keep thinking about us blowing up on the high seas. Fuck! I had those things." I went out the door and walked toward the beach. As I approached, I could see

this huge rubber raft sitting half in the water and half out. This was the Zodiac Milpro that would seat eight, but we only had four. It had the Evinrude 75432A 75HP outboard engine in which they told me that with the modifications that were put in by the CIA, it would be perfectly quiet; and with the two fuel tanks, it would get us to Cuba without any problem. This boat is 100 percent stealth, which means it can't be located on any radar or any other kind of detection equipment. The deck of this inflatable boat, the RH1B, has a rigid floor and a solid hull. Sean had just told me that it was really comfortable on the water because it cut right through the waves without much trouble. I told him, "We'll see."

After quick goodbyes, we finally pushed off at 2058 hours, two minutes ahead of schedule, and slowly made our way out of Haitian waters and into the Caribbean Ocean and our final destination—Varadero, Cuba.

The trip was really uneventful, except as we were approaching Cuban waters, we could see a number of Navy vessels in a semi-circle. We concluded that this must be the Navy's blockade that was still intact even after the Russians had dismantled their missiles and sent them back to Moscow. I counted four small ships, which I took as destroyers, and one very large ship, which I thought was an aircraft carrier. Because it was so dark, I really didn't get a good look, but from the lights on the bow to stern, I could tell it was a really big ship.

All the ships were approximately ten miles from where we were entering Cuban waters, and we surmised that they were looking for larger ships. Something as small as us went undetected. It was 0415 when we started slowly coming into Varadero. A small light on the beach would come on and then go off immediately, and this was happening for about five minutes. Sean whispered to me, "That is our contact. Don't make any undue noise." As we pulled up to the beach, about five men came out of the trees that surrounded the beach and grabbed the Zodiac and quickly pulled it to the beach where they let us get out. Once out, the men quickly picked it up and moved it to the

trees where there was already a huge hole dug. They placed it in upside down and quickly filled the hole with sand and then went back to the beach and started to cover up the footprints that was made.

After they finished with the footprints and the boat, we were hustled to a waiting truck and told to get in the back and lie down on the floor. The ride was only going to take fifteen minutes, but there was a good chance that a patrol would be on the roads, especially near roads that came close to the beaches. The Cuban government, especially Castro, was so paranoid that the United States was going to invade them that they had patrols out every single night looking for anything that looked like an invasion. The Cubans who picked us up said that they were stopped on the way, but they never said what happened, and Sean told me not to ask.

Varadero is a beach community far out on an isthmus. I found out that we didn't come straight into Varadero, but we went around the far end of the isthmus and came in on the southern side of the island. From Varadero to the main part of the island, there was no one living there, so driving down a very bumpy dirt road, we didn't have to worry about people, just the military patrols. When we came to the main island of Cuba, we started to head west on another dirt road, but it was less bumpy. Dawn was coming quickly, and I could tell that the driver was getting quite anxious to get off the road. Just before we came to the village of Carbonera, we took a quick left and headed up to mountains for about another fifteen minutes. Just as the sun started to appear in the east, we came to a stop.

"Here we are, Jim. Our home away from home for the day. We'll be here while the sun is up and leave at sundown," Sean said as we were instructed to get out of the truck and make our way to this cave that was right in front of us.

It was cool inside, but not cold. There was no light, and it was difficult for us to see, but as soon as the sun came in full view, the Cubans lit some torches so we could see. We couldn't cook anything because they were afraid the smell of something cooking would be

detected by the patrols. They had cold chicken and some fruit for us to eat. Then they told us to rest, and we would be leaving as soon as it was dark.

I was shaken out of a deep sleep by Sean, and he said we were ready to travel again. The truck seemed to appear from nowhere, and we got into the back and lay on the floor for the next part of our journey, which was just NW of a larger town of Matanzas. Again, we went into the mountains and another cave. It was now March 2, and we had only six more days. It didn't seem that we were moving at all that fast toward Havana, and when I mentioned this to Sean, he just looked at me and said that his men knew what they were doing and for me not to worry. Again, we slept most of the day, and the next evening, we were in the truck at sundown and on our way to Santa Cruz del Norte. Halfway through, a horn started to sound, and the truck quickly pulled over to the side of the road.

"Be very quiet. It's a military convoy. We will let it pass and then get off the road for a while," Sean whispered to me.

I could hear the trucks going by, and then this awful sound like it was the end of the world. "Sean, what's that?"

"Be quiet. I'll tell you later. Don't even breathe loud." He had his head up and was peeking out the side flap. After about ten minutes, the sounds of the convoy were way off in the distance, and we started to pull out into the road when the truck stopped short.

"Problema" came from the front of the truck. "Revolucionarios" came again from the front of the truck. Both were in Spanish. I took Spanish in high school and wasn't very good in it, but I definitely knew what those two words meant. We have a problem, and it was Castro's patrols. This wasn't what I really wanted to hear.

"Don't move, but get your weapon ready" was what Sean was whispering. I had my haversack off and was looking for the Raptor II Silencer I had for my MP5 submachine gun. I found it, and slowly I screwed it onto the end of the barrel. Then I clicked the safety off. Slowly and as quietly as I could, I pulled back the slide, and I could

hear the round quickly get into position. I snapped it back, and it made the loudest sound. Everyone at the back look at me, as if I had just shot someone.

“Oh, shit,” whispered Sean in that great Irish accent.

I then heard a very gruff voice in Spanish, “*lo que es ese sonido?*” I found out later that it meant “What’s that sound?”

“Solo animales,” the driver said, which meant “Just animals.”

“Quiero mirar or I want to look” was the demand from the leader of the patrol.

“Get ready, Jim” came from Sean.

“How many?” I tried to whisper, but I knew it came out loud.

“Maybe four or five. But we have to take them out as silently as we can because the convoy will hear anything out of the ordinary, and they will be back as fast as they came.”

As the rear flap opened and our driver ducked down, I jumped to my feet while pulling the trigger of my MP5, hitting the leader of the patrol on the head and his assistant on the neck. I jumped off the back of the truck and rolled, but by the time I got to my feet, the other two in the jeep had already been neutralized by Sean’s person on the front seat of our truck. Just quickly as this happened, Sean’s Cubans grabbed all the bodies and carried them over to the side of the road and threw them in the ditch. I jumped back in the truck, but this time, I didn’t lie on the floor but sat at the back on the long bench that acted as a seat, facing the rear, with my MP5 on my lap.

We continued to Santa Cruz del Norte, and right before the town, we took a sharp left and started down yet another bumpy back road to Jaruco, which I was told was only thirty miles from Havana. This was only the third of March, and we were just this close. Tomorrow evening, I would want to go into Havana and check out the hotel and the baseball field. I was sure these guys of Sean’s could get us in and out without any trouble since they got us away from that military convoy. I remembered I had to ask Sean a question about the convoy and what

that huge noise was at the end of the convoy.

We were coming up the town of Jaruco when, again, the driver got off this bumpy old road and got onto one that was even worse. It was still very dark out, but we started to go up again, and I assumed we were heading for the mountains as we did before. The truck this time took a very long time to go even a few feet, and when I had had enough, I went to the back of the truck and looked out. We were right on the edge of a cliff with the road behind us just rocks and gravel, and I assumed again that the road in front of us wasn't much better.

"Stop this fucking truck!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, and the truck came to a stop.

"Why are we going up this fucking shit road? Why don't we just leave the truck here and go ahead on foot? Nobody is going to see the truck from where we're at, and nobody in their right mind would come up this fucking trail."

"It's out in the open, and we can't risk that. The driver, Jose, says that there is a turn off about one hundred yards up this trail, and he will put it in there. It will also give him some room to turn around.

"Okay, but if you don't mind, I'll walk the rest of the way. I couldn't sit in that thing wondering if I was going over the side or not. Let's get this thing moving."

We went up the trail, and just as Jose said, there was a turn off at one hundred yards. Right behind that was another cave, and this one was smaller than the last. It was warm and dry because there was a storm coming, and you just knew that it was going to get wet. We just got into the cave when it seemed the sky just opened up and a deluge of water just came down, and it lasted for about an hour. When it stopped, we went out and looked around, and to our horror, the trail seemed to be washed away also.

"What do we do know?" I asked Sean for him to translate to his people.

"They said that we'd have to walk down the mountain and then

try to steal another truck, or we can wait a day until the trail dries out and drive this truck down.”

“I don’t think that a day is going to dry this out, and what happens if another storm comes? We can’t wait to many more days. I think that walking down the mountain may be the answer. Jose can wait here with the truck, and if he thinks he can get it down to the bottom without going over the side, then he’s welcomed to try. But I’m not going to be in that piece of shit.” I was beside myself, but getting angry wasn’t going to solve the problem.

“We’ll leave late this afternoon when the sun is going down, but it won’t be pitch black yet. Hopefully, we’ll be on the deck before it gets really dark,” Sean said with authority.

It was 1000 on March 3, only five days left. We all went into the cave and tried to get some sleep, but something was eating at me. I just couldn’t put my finger on it. I tossed and turned, and just as I was getting to sleep, Sean came and shook me, “Jim, time to get going.”

“What time is it? Is it still daylight?”

“It’s 1500, and we can walk down the trail for about two hours until it starts to get dark. It’s going to be a little slippery, so we will have to stay as close to the inside as possible. Once we get down to the bottom, we can make up our minds on what we will do next,” Sean sounded positive as always, but something in his voice sounded strange. But again, I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Slippery wasn’t the word for what we were going through on our way down. If I fell once, I must have fallen six times and slid about ten feet with every fall. Everyone was having trouble, but the Cubans laughed the hardest when they saw me fall and cuss after I hit the ground. Finally, we got to the bottom of the mountain with mud all over us and looking for some place to wash off. We were all going up and down the road when we heard this crazy sound coming from the trail, and to our surprise, here comes Jose with the truck going about thirty miles an hour and mowing down anything that was in his way. I thought I had mud on me, but to look at that truck, I would guess all

the mud on the trail was now part of this ugly truck. Right now it was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen.

Jose finally stopped, and we all jumped at the back. Off we went toward Havana with the next stop being a small escape house in Marapito in La Habana, which is on the east side of Havana and about three miles from the baseball field and the hotel. The hotel is on San Lazaro Street off Galiano Angeles on the corner of San Nicolas Street, which is about a half mile from the port. First thing this evening at 2330, we would go on foot to recon the hotel and the baseball field. Tomorrow being the fourth, this would leave us with three full days to get everything we needed regarding what floor the shot would be from and if there was any outside distractions that would cancel our mission. We got to the house around 0900 after going around the city and taking all sorts of cart paths and trails, staying clear of all the main highways or even streets that would have a lot of congestion. I hit the couch as soon as we got in, and I was asleep immediately and was comfortable and dreaming of Linda when Sean shook me once more.

"Sorry, Jim. You had this great look on your face, and I knew you were dreaming. But it's almost 2330. It will take us about three hours to get to the hotel, and we will be able to stay there until its dark. Hopefully, my information is correct, and it's disserted. But if it isn't, then we'll have to come up with an alternative plan."

"Well, Mr. Positive, let's worry about that when we get there, and Castro is waiting for us." I gave him a little punch in the arm, and I got up and went into the bathroom. I took a leak and splashed water on my face and changed into civilian clothes so I wouldn't look too suspicious with a military uniform on. I came out of the bathroom just in time to see Sean in a deep conversation with one of his men and arguing vigorously.

"Anything wrong?" I asked about the discussion.

"No. Pedro doesn't think we should be walking to the hotel, but I tried to tell him that a truck at this time of night will bring a lot of suspicion, and we really don't need that right now."

“Okay. How many of your men are going with us?”

“All of them. There will be six more at the hotel. Bringing a total of ten of my men and you and me.”

“All right. Let’s get going. It’s going to be a slow journey to the hotel, and we may not be coming back here,” I said to the surprise of Sean.

“Why not? We have everything here, and don’t you want to get some more sleep and have those awesome dreams again?” he asked with a very peculiar smile.

“Yes and no. I feel that if we can get into the hotel and get everything set up, it doesn’t make much sense for us to come back here and risk someone going through the hotel and finding some of the things that we’ve done. We can sleep on the floor, and going without something to eat for a few days won’t kill us.” I was getting a bad vibe from Sean, but I couldn’t figure out why.

We all went out the back door and down the alley to the main street. Once we got onto the main street, we broke out into three units—two-man teams with a space of three minutes apart. Sean and I were in the second unit right behind Jose, the truck driver, and his little brother. We kept them in sight even though they were that far ahead. We had one other group right behind us, so I felt a little overly protected, which was fine, just in case we got stopped by the military or the police. We seemed to be walking for hours, and then we came to the main street with a few cars. Nobody was really paying attention to us. We kept close to the buildings so not to cause any undue curiosity, and we kept walking until we came to Galiano Angeles. We then turned left for one block, crossed the street heading for the beach, and we saw it. The Hotel Habana Libre was on the right side of San Nicholas Street, and right across the street was the baseball field. The only problem was that the hotel faced the ocean and no windows faced the park.

“What the hell are you going to do now?” Sean almost screamed the question.

“Let’s get into the hotel and recon the situation, and I’ll tell you

then. Send a couple of your men up to the roof, and make sure we can use that just in case," I was talking, but all I could see was the hotel at the wrong angle. We went to the side, and Sean's people had already jimmed the door open. After we entered, they closed and locked it, just as nothing had ever happened. We went to the lobby and looked around. Nothing was working, and it looked to me that there hadn't been anything working in this place for a very long time. We found the far stairwell that would lead us to the higher floors and eventually the roof.

After we got to the sixth floor, I told Sean to go and see if there were any windows that would face the baseball field. As he reconnoitered the sixth floor, I took another of Sean's men, Emilio, and we went to look over the seventh floor. I went into room 7016, which looked over the ocean, and I went to the balcony and tried to open the sliding door. Nothing happened. It was liked they had welded the door shut. I told Emilio to go and get some of his people and come back and try to open the sliding door. He left, and in the meantime, Sean came up the stairs.

"Can't get the sliding door open," he said with frustration.

"Same here. I am wondering if I can get a clean-enough shot from the balcony. If we have to, break the glass on the door."

Jose and his brother appeared after about half an hour, and the brother had something in his hand. However, it was dark, and I couldn't make out what it was. Jose started to kick at the base of the door, but it was not hard enough to break the glass. He did this for about five minutes, and then his brother came forward, took whatever was in his hand, and wedged it between the end of the door and the base of the wall. There was grunting and groaning, and I could swear whatever it was bent almost ninety degrees. Then the door popped, and it slid open for about a foot.

"Nice job, brother. What the hell is that in your hand?" I asked, trying to see in the dark.

"A crowbar," Jose said in almost perfect English.

"Where did you get a crowbar?" I now was very curious.

“From the car parked about five blocks down the street. I figured he wouldn’t need it, so I popped his trunk and grabbed it.”

Nothing was going to surprise me anymore, or at least that was what I thought. I pulled the door a little more and then squeezed through and onto the balcony. I went left and stopped at the end.

“What do you think, Jim?” Sean asked.

“I don’t want to lean over, but if I don’t, I won’t have the greatest shot. Let’s go up to the roof and see what’s that like.” I left the balcony and exited room 7016 and started up the stairs once again. This hotel has sixteen floors, which means there are really seventeen or eighteen floors because of the mezzanine or the ballrooms or even sometimes the banquet halls are on the same section of the hotel.”

We reached the top, and again, Sean’s men had opened the door to the roof. I stepped through and went over to the side of the hotel that overlooked the ball field. The roof was the typical roof on any large building—whether it be in Cuba, Vietnam, or the USA. The only thing different about this roof was there happened to be a six-foot high wall around the edge of the roof. I am six feet and a few micro inches, but I couldn’t even see over this wall.

“Is there a box, ladder, or anything I can stand on to be higher than the wall?” I looked around and saw nothing.

“Can’t see anything, Jim. I’ll send the guys down to the rooms to see if there is anything there that we can use.” Sean turned to talk to his men.

“Make sure they know that it has to be at least three feet high!” I yelled as he was dismissing them. As he turned around, I asked him, “Do you know how wide the wall is? Do you think I could lie down and fire? I have an idea.” I jumped up and started toward the corner of the building. “Here, you have a wall that is facing the baseball field, and it comes down into a ninety-degree angle with the wall that’s facing the beach. If I can get a piece of wood or a board that I could put across the angle, then I’d be able to lie down on the board and face the ball

field. Go tell your guys to look for a very sturdy piece of wood that I could lie on and won't break." He then took off in a dead sprint to go find his guys and tell them what I wanted.

I stood at the corner, thinking about what I was asking for. I'd have to have all my 165 pounds on the piece of wood, with my feet dangling over the back side. I didn't bring a tripod for the rifle that would make it work better, but if we did find a wood that was thick, then this could work. They looked the rest of the night, but no one found anything except three pieces of 2x4 that didn't have strength in the middle.

"Sean, we have a couple of days to perfect this. Do you think your guys could go outside the hotel to see if they could find something lying around?" Again, he ran to tell his men what I wanted and to make sure they didn't get seen or caught.

The night was long, but daybreak was coming. With the fifth of March, which left three more days, we were not even anywhere near ready. Sean tried to get in touch with the commander, but he wasn't answering, or the radio was not working. I knew he tested it before we left, and it worked perfectly. However, now we were more than three hundred miles apart, and something wasn't right.

"I just was thinking of our exit from this place. After we get out of here, where do we go from here?" I asked Sean, who was still thinking of the wood and if it would work.

"I imagine we'll go back to the house and wait for instructions on how we will be extracted. Do you have a better idea?"

"How long would it take for Jose and his little brother to go get the Zodiac and bring it across the street?" I was thinking that everyone of Castro's men and the Russians would be looking for an escape down the streets, but I didn't think they'd look for an immediate extraction by boat right in front of them.

"I would take them a day or maybe day and a half, but if you want us to run out of the hotel, go across the sandy beach front and then get into a boat right in front of everyone. You must be daft."

"Sean, every street in the immediate area will be swarming with

military personnel and armored cars. To try to get back to the house will be almost impossible, but I don't think anyone will expect us to hightail it across the beach and into a boat. I think we should try it. Remember, it's going to be dark, and the beach does not have search lights. The streets are going to be too hairy, so if it's not the beach, then we have to come up with something else. Send Jose and his brother to get the boat, and explain to them what's at stake."

"I thought we were going to use the sewers and the water pipes to get out of here?"

"Yes, we were or are, but if they start to enter the sewage system or water system, then we are dead ducks. They also can cut us off or get behind us and have us dead in the middle. I'm not saying the beach is the perfect exit, but I think we'd have more of a chance to escape that way than the ones we've already planned on."

I was a little concerned about how Sean wanted to stick with the original plans and thought of the last two missions I was on. We changed every two minutes. I couldn't understand why he was so adamant about this, but I thought it could be he was concerned because of his men and how they would get away also.

"If you are concerned about your men, that boat can take up to sixteen people. We only have ten, so there should be no problem. I hope Jose knows to hide somewhere before he comes to the beach and only be there the night of the eighth. What do you think?"

"I think he's smart, but he may be a little confused because I've drummed this into their heads that we were going through the sewers or the water systems, and that's the course our exit would be. Now you've changed that, and I'm not too sure about my people. They are petrified about being caught by Castro's men and what would be done to them if they are caught. I just don't like changing things in midstream and not really having a very secure exit from this building. I'm just saying, Jim, that running across the beach just after a high-level Russian general is shot and killed is a very risky plan. All that needs to happen is one person seeing us running, and the game is

over. Remember, there are going to be both Russian security forces and Cuban military in attendance and offering security all the way around the baseball field and possibly outside also. If they are outside the ballpark and surrounding it, then I'll guarantee that we will be seen. We will be captured or killed, and my people know this. Believe me, they are not happy."

"I hate to say this to you, but I really don't care. I have to take this shot, and then I have to get down from this homemade shooting blind and hope I don't fall off the balcony, get down, put the rifle away, and then get out of here. This doesn't give me much time, and you're worried about your people. I'm worried about myself, and if I get out of this, then we all get out. I'm not saying the beach is full proof, but I think it offers us a better chance on getting to Haiti than the sewer or the water pipes. Think about it. We still have some time."

As Sean was walking away, shaking his head, I started to think that maybe we had arrived here much too early. Tomorrow would be the sixth, and that still gave us two whole days to just sit around and think of what might or might not happen. Paranoia did set in when you really had nothing to do. I decided to send a couple of Sean's guys down to the lobby to keep watch there and, of course, with Sean's permission. He thought it was a good idea, and he also sent three more of his men to watch all sides of the hotel for any unrecognizable activity such as military buildup around the hotel.

The sixth came and went with no problems, and the day of the seventh came and along with that was the appearance of Jose. He told Sean that he left his brother with the boat, and he thought he'd come up and see where we were to meet and approximately what time we wanted the boat to be where we pointed out. I wasn't that happy with him showing up because he came in at daylight, and God knows who could have seen him.

"Sean, ask him how he got into the building."

Sean said a bunch of Spanish words, which I understood a couple of them, but mostly, he could have asked what the weather was like.

“He came through the sewers from where he left his brother. He said that no one was around because it was really early just at first light, and he was sure he wasn’t seen.

All day long, I kept getting this strange feeling of eminent doom, but I just tried to shake it off, believing that this was really my first mission that could go wrong. Vietnam was really an easy mission due to who and where it was. The only problem with that mission was the long walk through three countries and the short time that we had to get to Saigon.

This was different. We were here way too early, and all we were doing was sitting around and waiting for the ceremony to start at the ballpark. We still weren’t sure of our exit strategy, but I still felt the beach and the boat was the best way to escape. I had given into Sean’s demands that we used the sewer to go to the far end of the street before we would come out and cross the street to the beach and the boat. I couldn’t get this feeling out of my head, and I needed to talk to Sean about this.

“Sean, how do you feel about this mission? Have you had any doubts about what’s going on or what’s going to happen after we get the target?”

“I’ve felt that we are not on the same page regarding getting out of here. You have it set in your mind, and I’m afraid that you are looking at this as you are the only one that this pertains too. You’re not listening to anyone who has a different opinion.”

“I have come to the conclusion that you’re right about using the sewers, but I’d like to know where we will exit the sewers and try to reach the beach and the boat.” I still was set on using the boat for escape.

“I’m with you on the boat, but I think it should be further down the beach. So it won’t be that easy to spot.”

“How far down the beach?”

“About a mile, maybe a mile and a half. I think that far down no one would ever dream that we would go that way,” he sounded very

precise in what he was selling.

"I don't know what it is, but I got a strange feeling about this whole operation. Get on the satellite phone and ask the commander if they have heard anything odd coming out of here. Tell him there's no movement over at the ball field, whether for the women's thing or even a baseball game. Everything has been shut down. We only have a day till the Women's Day and still nothing going on. I just feel that this is really weird."

"Usually, they have sound men and security flowing over every bit of the stadiums that the hierarchy will be at, but nothing here. We still have a day and a half to go, but I'd like to see some activity across the street." Sean had some distress in his voice.

"Sean, send Jose back out to his brother and tell him to keep the boat a mile down the beach, and if anyone comes around to take it out to sea, just wait for our signal. The signal will be two long lights, then three long lights, and then two short ones from a flashlight. Anything other than that, then he's to get out as quick as he and his brother are able to because this will mean we have either been captured or we are dead. Also, send a couple of your men down to the bottom floor, and keep an eye on what's going on at the stadium. If there is movement around the stadium, we must know immediately. If it's around the hotel, we must know sooner. Also, keep trying to raise the commander on the phone, and don't stop until you get him. I need to know if he's heard anything and what he wants us to do to get out of here."

I spent the rest of the day going over all our alternatives to get out of here alive. I just couldn't get it out of my mind that something had gone wrong. The general was sent back to Moscow, and they'd canceled the function. Someone had given us up, and they were just waiting to pounce on us when the time was right.

The following morning, the eighth of March was a very clear day and was unseasonably warm, but again, there was no movement at the ball field. Now I knew something was wrong, and we needed to figure out how to get out of this place without being seen. If so, we were to

engage in a fire fight or just try to escape. We still couldn't reach the commander on the phone, but Sean didn't think it was being jammed. As we were sitting on the roof, trying to figure out what to do, one of Sean's men came running up the stairs and came to Sean, very much out of breath.

"Que estan en el otro lado del hotel. Alrededor de 100 de laellas," he was panting as he was yelling.

"What did he say, Sean?"

"He says that they are on the other side of the hotel, and there are about one hundred of them."

"Oh, shit. Does he know if they are going to charge the hotel, or are they just waiting?"

"Va a cobrar o simplemente esperando?"

"Esperando," he said rather emphatically.

"Waiting. What do you think we should do?"

"Not wait up here for them, that's for sure. We got to start down the stairs, but two at a time. If they think we are coming down all together, then they will storm the hotel. Ask him if they have any tanks or large weapons or just small arms."

"No armas grande. Solo armas cortas."

"Only small arms. No larger types yet," Sean said with conviction.

"Okay, let's saddle up and start down the stairwell. Keep trying to reach the commander, and if you, ask him who gave us up, or was it just a great guess on Castro's part?" Sarcasm always helps in these types of situations.

We started down the stairwell but very slowly. It was very dark, so we tried to count to ten in between people going down. I was next to last, with Sean taking up the rear. I knew someone had given us up. I knew it wasn't me, and the other one I could only think of was Sean. So I wasn't really feeling safe having him behind me. As we descended the stairs, all we could hear was the footsteps on the stairs, but as we hit the landing of the fifth floor, all hell broke loose. Gun shots started

ringing out from down below, and the yelling was all in Spanish.

"Estanis auskadis!" came the screaming, which meant "We're cut off."

There was more yelling, and then, "Volver Arriba," which meant "Go back up."

"Sean, let's set up some resistance here on the sixth floor. The only way they are going to get us is to come up the stairwell, seeing the elevator doesn't work or does it now? Are you still trying to get the commander?"

"The elevator has no power because all the electrical wires have been taken out and have been for some time. Still haven't been able to reach the commander, but I'm still trying. I've sent out a Mayday, and hopefully, someone will get it."

We set up a temporary bunker with chairs and tables on the sixth floor, and I told Sean to have a couple of his men to set up the same on the ninth and on the roof if we needed it. We jammed the door open so we could see what was coming up the stairs. It was still small armed fire, but we all expected grenades and possibly small rockets to be used at any minute. As Sean's people came back up the stairs, we grabbed each one and pulled them into the room. We stopped firing, but the Cuban militia hadn't and kept it up as they ascended the stairs. As we waited, I connected my night scope to my submachine gun and waited. Sweat was now pouring down my face due to two things: It was hot, and I was scared. I couldn't imagine any way we were going to get out of this without either being killed or captured.

"Que estan enel quinto pisp!" one of Sean's men shouted loud, meaning "They're on the fifth floor."

"How many are there?" I screamed in English.

Sean shouted after me in Spanish, "Tal vez diez," meaning "Maybe ten."

"Hold your fire until they hit the sixth floor landing!" I shouted, and again, Sean shouted over the bullets being fired from below.

“Get on the phone and shout another Mayday. Tell them we are taking heavy fire, and we are going to take the final stand up on the roof of the hotel.” As I was talking, he was yelling into the phone exactly what I told him to say, but after he finished, he looked at me and shook his head, telling me no one was there. “Easy, easy. Fire, fire!” I yelled at the top of my lungs, with Sean repeating in Spanish.

Bullets were flying everywhere, and Sean’s people were good fighters they couldn’t hit shit. Bullets were hitting off the walls inside the fifth floor, and they weren’t coming from the militia. I looked through my scope and could see two or three Cubans on the landing, and I opened up with my machine gun and took at least one of them out. Sean also was firing at will. As the militia tried to gain the landing, we were firing right on them, but as they fell, another ten would take their place.

The only thing I was concerned about was running out of ammunition. We started toward the landing, firing at anything that moved and forced them to back down to the fifth floor landing. As they retreated down, we went up to the ninth floor and set up again as we had on the sixth floor. Again, we waited to see some movement on the landing, and within ten minutes, through all the bullets there, they were again trying to establish a foothold. Again, we opened fire, driving them back down, and then we stopped firing, trying to conserve as much ammunition as we could. All at once, all the firing stopped, and I could hear someone yelling from down below in Spanish.

“Que esta rodeado,” meaning, “You are surrounded.”

“No hay manera de salir,” meaning, “There is no way out.”

“Debe renunciar o morir,” meaning, “You must give up or die.”

All these were being translated to me by Sean, but I kind of got the gist of the conversation without his translation.

“Sean, tell him to go to hell.”

“Ir al infierno!” he screamed as hard as he could.

“Not bad for an Irishman,” I said but to no one in particular.

The firing started up all over again, but this time, it was really intense. Bullets were flying every which way, and we were really hugging the floor. Every once in a while, I would stick my machine gun up over the table I was behind and crank off about ten rounds.

“We got to get out of here and up to the roof. We can make our last stand up there, and we will have more room to maneuver!” I yelled at Sean to tell his men.

Again, we opened up onto the landing, driving the militia back down the stairs. As we did so, we moved out and up to the roof. As we ascended, a couple of Sean’s men got hit, and we had to carry them up the stairs. When we got to the roof, we barricaded the door with almost anything we could find, including the boards that I was going to use as a shooting platform. The roof door was metal, so it was really difficult for any of the militia’s bullets to penetrate. But it didn’t take long for the first grenade to find the right spot. A big blast came! The door came flying open, but no one followed it—no firing, no nothing, not even a screaming from down below to give up.

We could hear a noise from far away, but we couldn’t make out what it was until we looked up and saw two blinking red lights on the horizon. It was two Marine Corps gunships coming in from the ocean, and as they approached the hotel, both started opening up with their twin .50 caliber machine guns. They were hitting the sides of the hotel and were not shooting at anyone. They were just trying to scare the militia in staying down and not getting shot. As one helicopter came onto the roof, the other stayed about fifty yards off the roof and kept firing.

The helicopter set down right at the middle of the roof, and they were yelling and gesturing for us to get onboard quickly, which didn’t take too long. As we ran for the helicopter, the Marine operating the machine gun opened up on the entrance and just kept it up until we were all onboard, even the wounded and dead. As the helicopter started to ascend, I looked toward the cockpit, and in the copilot’s seat was the commander giving us the thumbs up. As we left the area, we

could see the militia coming on to the roof, but no rounds were fired. There were no casualties on the Cuban side, which later, I found out that this was good for our denial of anything ever happening.

"Where are we?" I asked as I got out of the helicopter and walked over to the commander.

"Gitmo, but you won't be here for long." He shook my hand and Sean's hand.

"How did you know where we were?" I asked out of curiosity.

"We got your Mayday, and the last broadcast said you were going to be on the roof for your last stand. I thought I was listening to General Custer at the Big Horn," he said with a laugh and added, "Very dramatic."

"Well, anyway, thanks for picking us up. How are our guys?"

"Two dead and three pretty well shot up, but the doctor says they will be all right in time. How are you two doing?"

"We're great, but did you ever find out who sold us out?"

"Yes and no. I talked to Mrs. Gomez, and she said that Mr. Rodriguez had left Miami. The freedom fighters feel he went back to Cuba, and he's probably the one who gave you up, seeing he knew all our plans."

"What about Mrs. Gomez? Would she do it? She also knew everything," I said, trying to figure out who actually did it.

"No, I really don't think so. She was upset that we did change the target, but she hates the regime in Cuba so much I really don't think she would jeopardize a mission. It had to be Rodriguez."

"Well, whoever it was, they almost got us killed. You came just in time."

"The Calvary to the rescue. Just like in the Westerns." He let out a huge laugh.

We were told to clean up, shower, shave, get a new pair of utilities, and get a little sleep and something to eat. Then we would have a

debrief in about four hours. I was still thinking of how close I came to dying that I couldn't sleep, but I did get a good meal, seeing we hadn't eaten in about four days on that roof.

The debrief went very well, and we were told that Jose and his brother made it out and got back to Haiti, which made both Sean and I relieved. As the debrief ended, the commander told Sean that he was being assigned back in Washington, and I was going to a helicopter out of Guantanamo Bay this afternoon. I was to be dropped in Beaufort, South Carolina, and I was going to be stationed there for a while. I would be needed for any assignments for at least a year. As he told me this, I felt like I was being punished for what had happened in Cuba, but it would be nice to get back to the real Marine Corps and also my upcoming nuptials. I knew I had a lot of explaining to be done with Linda, and it was going to take all the lying I could muster.

The helicopter took off at exactly 1500 and landed in MCAS, Beaufort at 2245 local time. A car picked me up and drove me to the headquarters. I walked into the lobby, and a master sergeant came up and said that the colonel would see me immediately. He escorted me into the colonel's office.

"I'm Col. Theodore Greene, and I'm base commander. Welcome to MCAS Beaufort, Sergeant." He stuck out his hand but never told me to be at ease.

"It's nice to be here, sir."

"Probably any place is better than what you just came from."

"Sir?" I didn't want to say anything about what happened until I knew if he knew anything.

"Gitmo, not the best duty station."

"No, sir, it really isn't." I figured he was either fishing or really believed I was based at Guantanamo Bay.

"Now, Sergeant, you are going to be part of our military police detachment here. We are in charge of this base and the military housing area known as Laurel Bay. We also do some duty over at Parris

Island every once in a while, usually when a recruit goes over the hill. Have you ever served in a military police unit before?"

"No, sir, I haven't, but I'm willing and able to learn really quickly."

"Are you married, Sergeant?" he asked.

I came to the conclusion that my military records hadn't arrived yet, so he was fishing. He seemed like a really nice man, and for an officer, that was rare.

"No, sir. I'm engaged."

"Are you getting married soon?"

"Well, that's going to be up to her. I think probably next summer if I'm still in the states or sooner if I'm deployed." I started to relax and answer the questions without much thought.

After I was dismissed by the colonel, he had a lance corporal escort me over to the military police barracks, and seeing that I was an NCO, I was given my own room. The lance corporal told me that my possessions, meaning my seabag, would be arriving in Beaufort at approximately 1600 hours this afternoon. Until then, I could stay here in the barracks, or I could walk around and get the lay of the land. I asked if he knew anything about my car, and he said that he assumed when they said possessions, they also meant my car. My car was a 1960 Plymouth Fury. It was a two-door, blue-and-white car with white interior and with a push button transmission on the dash, and it was very fast.

The first thing I decided to do was call Linda, but it was only 1300 hours. She would still be in school and wouldn't get home until 1600 or later. I made a mental reminder to call her before I did anything this evening. I decided to walk over to the MP headquarters and to get acquainted with some of the personnel and also see when I was going to be on duty. The MP shack was right next to headquarters, so it was about one fourth of mile from the barracks and across the quad from the mess hall. I entered the lobby, and all eyes came up and just stared at me.

"May I help you, Sergeant?" a rather attractive WM corporal asked me.

"Yes, please. My name is Sergeant James Coleman, and I'm being stationed here. I just arrived on base and thought I'd come over and meet some of you, folks," I tried to sound friendly.

"We've been expecting you, Sergeant. My name is Cpl. Audrey Reynolds, and I'm Captain Richards' adjutant." She was approximately five feet three tall and weighed one hundred pounds. She was soaking wet and had a great figure, even though you couldn't see a lot because of her ugly WM uniform. She had long blond hair. "Is there any particular thing that I can help you with?" she answered in the sweetest southern accent.

"First, you can call me Jim, and I would like to meet the CO, if he's in."

She got up out of her chair and went to a door directly behind her. She knocked and then entered. She was standing on the doorway when she gestured for me to come around the desk. I entered the office, and there sitting at the desk was Capt. Irving S. Richards, commanding officer of the military police detachment at MCAS Beaufort.

"Welcome, Jim. I'm Irv Richards, and this is my operation. We've been looking forward to having you with us ever since I heard you were being transferred here from 8th & I Barracks. Is there anything you need or want? Your car and bags will be here this afternoon. They are coming in on a C-130 from Washington, and you can pick them up at the air terminal. I'll have Audrey show you where when the time comes. I have you scheduled to start tomorrow at 0800, if that's okay. If you need more time to get yourself squared away, just let me know, and I'll schedule you later in the week." He stood up and shook my hand. He was all of five feet six, with ruddy complexion, and he wore glasses. He spoke with a New England accent, but it wasn't New York or Boston.

"Captain."

"Please, Jim, just call me Irv when we are alone. You can call me

captain when outside or when officers are around. We all go by first names here with no exception. I just want you to know that when I entered this man's Marine Corps, I was a private. That's right. I'm a mustang."

"Congratulation, Captain. Oh, I'm sorry, Irv. It's going to take me a little time to get used to that. What will my duties be, Cap...Irv?"

"Of course, you'll be sergeant of the guard. You won't have a post, but you'll be in here most of the time, monitoring what's going on. Then if necessary, you'll be out checking on problems or being at the scene of an accident or incident in Laurel Bay. Laurel Bay is our base housing for all married personnel here at Beaufort and also Parris Island. What's different about Laurel Bay than any other base is that junior officers and enlisted personnel live together. All senior officers from lieutenant colonel to the general at PI live on their respective bases, in what's become to be called officer's country. We are also in charge of the brig here, but we don't really have any full-time brig rats, mostly overnight guests who need to sleep it off or other things. One problem we have is when the Navy contingent, mostly doctors and corpsmen, go to Guantanamo Bay for six months rotation. Some of their spouses go out and party while they're away, and when they get back, it can be a little hectic. Are you married, Jim?"

"No, sir. I have a girlfriend back in Medford, Massachusetts, and we'll probably get married but not engaged yet." It wasn't a lie but a stretch of the truth.

"I have six kids. Two girls ages sixteen and eleven and four boys ages fifteen, ten, eight, and four. You can tell by them when I was overseas and when I came home. I'd like you to come to dinner next week and meet the family. I'll give you the address later, and Audrey can take you over to Laurel Bay and show you around. There's only one item I will give you warning about, and it's not for you but for the younger guys. It's that there are teenage girls who like to flirt with our MPs, and this can lead to a lot of troubles. Most of them are daughters of officers, and that's never good."

We small talked for another five minutes, and then he dismissed me but not in a military manner. It was more like if I didn't get back to work, there would be hell to pay. I went out to the lobby and stopped at Corporal Reynolds desk. "The captain said that you'll be taking me to the terminal this afternoon to get my belongings which are coming in on a flight. What time would you like to leave?"

"That's right, Jim. I'll call Washington in about an hour to make sure your stuff has made the flight and find out what the ETA will be. When I find out, I'll call over to the barracks and let you know. If you're not there, I will leave a message. Is that okay? Are you going anywhere in particular right now?"

It was getting to be lunch time, and I was getting hungry. "I was thinking of going to the mess hall and getting some lunch. Do you want to join me, or do you have set times you go to chow?"

"No, I can go at any time. Let me tell Irv we are going to lunch, and then we can leave. I'll drive, seeing you don't have a car." She got up, knocked on the captain's door, opened it, and said she and I were going to lunch. "Okay, let's go." She shut his door and walked toward her desk to get her purse and cover.

She parked at the back, and she had a 1964 Buick Electra 225 automatic, light green and white with Alabama plates. As we drove to the mess hall, she told me that she was twenty years old from Dothan, Alabama, and she'd been in the Corps for almost three years. But she didn't think she'd make a career of it. She wanted to go back home and go to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa or maybe Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. She said her father would disown her if she went to Auburn. Alabama fans are true to the university, and there is real hatred between the two. I asked if her father went to Alabama, but she said no, just a fan. He owned the town pharmacy but wasn't a pharmacist, just owned the business. She was an only child, and her mother had died when she was four years old. She was raised by her dad and paternal grandmother.

The conversation continued after we reached the mess hall and

got our food. She asked about my upbringing, what school I went to, how many brothers and sisters I had, if I had a girlfriend (which I said no), what I wanted to do with my life, how long I was in the Marines, and how I made my rank that fast. I came to the conclusion after she asked an awful lot of questions. As we sat at the table, a number of NCOs came by to say hi to her. She introduced me to everyone, both male and female.

“You know I haven’t been paid in almost a month. Do you know how I would go about getting my money?”

“Your records just came in this morning, so your pay records have been sent to disbursing. When we leave here, I’ll take you over to their office and introduce you to the one person who can help you.” She was just too perfect to be true.

As we exited the mess hall, we stopped, and Audrey introduced me to a few of the cooks who were standing by the exit to receive some praise for the food they prepared. Also standing there was a first lieutenant who was in charge of the mess hall, and he also was looking for some praise. The food was good but not great. However, the coffee was excellent, but I told all of them that it was superb. We went to disbursement, and I met Cpl. Sally Tedesco, NCO in charge of transfers and Audrey’s roommate. They were renting a house out in Beaufort with two other WMs. After Sally retrieved my file, she issued me a check for \$215.40, which was my sergeant’s pay for the month of February.

We left disbursements after I had filled out all sorts of papers for just being on base, and then we went back to the office. She gave me a locker in the rear where we would keep our side weapon, night stick, arm band, and white cover, which was in my seabag. She then took me over to show me the veterinarian office that was connected with us and then the guard dogs, which were all German Shepherds. Then I met all the handlers of the dogs.

After all this and Audrey being on the phone a few times, she said it was time for us to go to the terminal and retrieve my car and

personal belongings. The C-130 landed about five minutes late, and it took the crew to unload the car about thirty-five minutes. But my seabag and a few boxes were unloaded immediately, and after signing my life away, I had everything I wanted and was about to drive back to the barracks and unpack.

“You got plans for dinner tonight? The NCO Club has a steak special, and it’s really good and cheap. Want to go?” Audrey was yelling just before we both got into our vehicles.

“Sounds good to me. What time do you want me there?”

“How about 1930?” she asked with a smile and that accent.

“Sounds great. I’ll meet you there in 1930. What’s the dress for the day?” I inquired not wanting to be over- or under-dressed.

“Trousers and a collared shirt. See you then.” She got into her car and sped off.

I went back to the barracks and took all my stuff to my room and started to unpack. Everything was there. It really made me happy until I got to the middle of the seabag, and I took out a P-64 Polish pistol, which was used by the North Vietnamese. I didn’t know how it got in my bag, but a note said, “Enjoy but don’t let anyone know you have this weapon.” The note was not signed, and it was printed.

Besides the pistol, there was a full box of ammunition. I took both out of the bag and placed it on my bunk. I knew I couldn’t leave them here in my room, and I couldn’t bring them to work. So I took both out to my car, opened the trunk, and place them underneath my spare tire. I would leave them there until I drove up home and would leave them at my folk’s house because I knew Linda would just freak out.

Thinking of Linda, I decided that I would call her tonight and make some arrangements about going home. It wasn’t really that long ago when I returned from Vietnam. I was thinking of the last time I had leave, and that was for thirty days. Sometimes you could borrow on future leave, and I thought I would give Irv a pitiful reason for me to go home.

"Irv, do you think I'll be able to borrow on my future leave in a couple of weeks? I need to go home and see my girl."

"I don't think so, Jim. Things are starting to get really hectic around here, and there is a lot of talk that a lot of Marines are going to be sent to the Republic of Vietnam really soon. Do you know where Vietnam is, Jim?"

Little did he know that I knew exactly where Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand are and what the jungles there are like. "If we get orders, don't I get a thirty-day leave prior to deployment?"

"Yes, you do. I can give you a five-day pass if you really want to go back up to Boston, probably in a week or two. I'll have Audrey check our schedule, and she'll let you know. You do know that you're on duty this weekend for twenty-four hours each day, but you'll only have to be on duty physically during both days."

I thanked him and left the office. Audrey was at her desk, and she stopped me. "I'm going home this weekend. Would you like to see what Alabama looks like?"

"I'd love to, but I have the duty all weekend. I've got to stay on base. You know how it is."

"No, I don't," she said with a little smile. "Privileges of being the CO adjutant. Never had to pull NCO duty on the weekends." She turned and started to type some more.

I left the office, got into my car, and decided I'd drive down to Beaufort center and see about buying a TV for my duty this weekend. NCO duty started actually on Friday night at 1800 hours, and it finished on Monday morning at 0600 hours. During the daytime or from 0800 to 1600, I had to be physically present in the MP squad room, but at night, I could sleep in the duty bunk room. I could go to the mess hall or to the NCO for meals, but I would have to take my radio. That way, I was on call at all times.

Saturday morning started out like any other spring day in South Carolina. It was cool in the morning until 1000 hours, and then it started to get really hot. We were still in our winter green uniforms,

so with the heat, it would get uncomfortable in the early afternoon.

I was sitting in the NCO office when a call came in from Captain Richards, and this call, as it turned out, would change my feelings toward the officers and the Marine Corps for a very long time.

"We have a big problem in officer's country, Jim. Just got a call from Colonel Greene, and it seems his cat is stuck in the chimney. He can't get him out, and he's acting rather crazy so says the colonel. I want you to take Morgan and go out to his home to see if you can get his tabby out of the chimney."

"Okay, but wouldn't it be better if we sent the vet out there instead of the MPs?"

"For some reason, he asked if you were on duty, and when I said yes, he asked for you. You two got something going that I don't know about?" he didn't sound so amused.

"Not that I know of. I only met him that first day I got here. I've probably seen him driving out of the base a few times, but never have I spoken to him. Now his adjutant and I probably wouldn't exchange Christmas cards, if you know what I mean. I stopped him one night and searched his car because we got reports that an officer was stealing canned goods from the mess hall, and I told the gate to stop all officers' cars. He didn't like it. He made some remark that I'd be sorry for what I was doing, but I don't remember what I said back to him. It probably wasn't very respectful."

"Well, we'll deal with that tomorrow, but first, get to his house and take care of the situation. He's not home, but his wife is. I guess she's rather distraught over this, so please be on your best behavior."

After Irv hung up, I went out to the main office and asked where Morgan was.

"He's on patrol over in Laurel Bay, Jim. Do you want me to get him back here?" one of the privates who was on duty asked.

"Yes, please. Tell him to get back here as quick as possible. Also, tell him I'll meet him out back with a new truck, but first, I have to go

see the vet and tell him to wait out back.

I left the office and walked over to the veterinary hospital, which was located behind our building. I walked in and asked the corporal on the desk if a doctor or corpsman was around. Dr. Kwiatkowski, the doctor on duty, came out, and I asked him if there was any special way to get a cat out of a chimney. I then explained what I was talking about.

“The best way is to use a come-along or control pole. It’s a long pole with a rope loop at the end, and it’s controlled down at the opposite end. You try to get the loop around the cat’s neck, and slowly pull the loop closed snug but not choking the animal. Once you get him out of the chimney, put a blanket or net over the cat and place him in a cage and bring him back here. Try to get him in a gunny sack when getting him out of the cage, but if you can’t, put a blanket over him. Be very careful that he doesn’t bite you because the animal may be rabid. You don’t want to go through the treatment for rabies.” He gave me the control poll, and I left the hospital and went back to the parking lot and picked out a vehicle that I would use.

Anytime a truck is taken out by an MP, there are certain pieces of equipment that must be on board, and there are no exceptions no matter what the person’s job is. The most important is the “riot gun,” which is a sawed-off shotgun. Calling it a sawed-off shotgun is against the Geneva convention, so it’s called a riot gun. By calling it such is okay with the people in Geneva. A regular shotgun’s barrel measures between twenty-five to thirty-three inches in length, and a riot gun measures no longer than sixteen inches. There are two in a truck. The passenger has a holster attached to the door, and the gun fits in that. All you have to do is pull it straight out, and it will dislodge. The driver can use a holster if he’s left-handed, or there is a holder near the shift where you place the shotgun straight down the barrel first.

The riot gun that I used also had the stock sawed-off halfway and then tape, so it acted like a handgun. This is against all rules except the MP office where you are based. This office had no problem with the stock being cut, but if we get caught and were warned, then everyone

would have to change to the regular stock. Morgan finally showed up, parked his truck, and jumped into the truck I was driving.

"What's up, Jim? Why the great rush?" Then I explained to Morgan what Irv had told me, and as we drove to the colonel's house, we tried to figure the best way to do this. As we pulled up to the house, a rather stunning older lady was standing on the stoop, waiting for us. She was in her early fifties, with red hair and a great figure for her age, and she was wearing a bathrobe.

"Where have you been? I've been waiting for you for over an hour?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Greene. We were all the way over at Laurel Bay. It took us this long to get back to base, stop off at the veterinary hospital, pick up our equipment, and get the proper truck to get here. Sorry it took so long. Now where is your cat hiding?" I was trying to act like this was an everyday occurrence.

"She's not hiding, but she was stuck in the chimney. She's very scared. Mrs. Huffington has been with us for over ten years, and she's part of the family. If she's hurting, both Teddy and I are hurting." I presumed that Teddy was Colonel Greene.

"Well, Mrs. Greene, will you show me where Mrs. Huffington is at?" I followed her into the house, with Morgan right behind me.

"I followed her through the foyer and into the living room, which was huge. On the right side was a very large fireplace. Now hopefully, the cat went in from the living room and not down from the roof.

"Do you know how Mrs. Huffington got into the chimney?" She had a strange look with this question. "I mean, did she go up the chimney from here, or did she go down the chimney from the roof?"

"I really don't know, Sergeant. By the way, are you Sergeant Morgan? My husband wanted to make sure that one of the MPs is going to be here. Why, I have no idea, but he told me to ask."

"Morgan, go out and get me a pair of those leather gloves in the box in the rear of the truck—the ones that come all the way up the

arm." He dashed out of the house.

The chimney had an opening of about five feet square, and there was a grate for wood in the opening. Before I removed it, I asked Mrs. Greene if she had an old blanket or sheet that I could put down on the floor so dirt and soot wouldn't get on the floor. She left, and within seconds, she was back with an old blanket. I put it down in front of the opening and then lifted the grate out and placed it on the far side of the blanket. I had a flashlight with me, so I bent over and looked up the chimney to see if I could see the cat. She was about six to ten feet up the chimney on the right side. Morgan had now returned with the gloves and a sack and two blankets.

"Morgan, I'm going to try to hook the noose around the cat's neck and gently try to pull her down, but if she falls, make sure you get a blanket over her immediately. We can't let her get out of here. Mrs. Greene, are all the doors and windows shut?" She nodded her head.

I grabbed the come-along and slowly got on all fours and crept toward the opening. As I entered, I turned and was on my back, looking directly up the chimney and into the crazy eyes of that cat. As I slowly lifted the noose toward her, she hissed and spit like crazy, and then all of a sudden, she dropped. Now I didn't know if she was falling by accident, or she was coming for me. But I didn't wait to find out. As soon as I saw her paw come loose and rolled out of the way, I yelled to Morgan, "Coming down. Get the blanket on her."

Morgan did so, but the cat was going crazy inside the blanket. So he rolled it up with the cat in it and quickly ran out of the house and put the blanket with the cat inside the cage.

I turned to Mrs. Greene and said, "We will take her to the veterinary hospital, and they will look after her. She will be in great hands. She didn't get hurt when she fell because she landed on her feet, and the lance corporal is very gentle with animals. I'm sure he placed her in the cage." I just knew she was going to ask questions, so I thought I'd cut her off.

I then picked up all my equipment and went out to the driveway

and put everything at the back right next to the cage. In the meantime, the cat had freed herself from the blanket, and she was going crazy inside the cage, running and jumping straight up in the air and hissing like crazy.

As I got into the truck I asked Morgan, "Was the truck locked when you came back out?"

"I didn't come into the cab, but I got everything out of the back. So I don't know. Why is that important?"

"Basic regulations state that anytime we exit the vehicle and there are weapons inside, the vehicle must be locked, and weapons must be secured. Now the riot guns are secure, but the vehicle was left open. That's my fault."

"Does it really matter if it were open or locked? We are in officer's country, and who's going to bother the truck?" As I was listening to Morgan, I sort of agreed, but for some reason, Colonel Greene had asked for me. No one knew why.

We quickly drove back to the base, crossing Highway 21 and entering the entrance, then crossing through the gate and taking Geiger Blvd. to Moore Rd. and coming to a stop in the rear of the veterinary hospital. As I exited the truck, I took my riot gun and armed it. I didn't know why I did that, but it was probably by instinct. The safety, I assumed, was still on. I told Morgan to take his also but to lay it down in the rear of the truck until we got the cat out. I told him to take the extra blanket and hold it up, and when I unlocked the cage and opened the door, the cat would probably lung at the opening. It would be best to just put the blanket there, as she would run right into it. Best laid plans, sort of.

Morgan went to get the extra blanket from the back, but it wasn't there. He said he might have left it at the colonel's house. He got one of the gunny sacks, thinking the cat would run right into it. He stood to the right of the entrance because the door swung from right to left. I was standing directly in front of the door. I motioned to Morgan to see if he was ready, and he nodded back.

“Let’s make this as clean as we can. You’ve got the gloves on, but don’t let that fucking thing bite you. Safety first.” I reached to unlock the cage.

What happened next was really a blur. The door swung open, and I stepped back a couple of steps so Morgan could have the opening to get the jumping cat, but she didn’t jump. She just stood there with her eyes trained right on me. For some reason, Morgan left his position with the sack up in front of the cage and went to the side to hit the cage and get the cat moving. As soon as Morgan dropped the sack, the cat jumped out of the cage and right toward my face. In one motion, I brought up my right hand and pulled both triggers at the same time. The buck shot hit the cat full force, and a piece of her went through the cage through the back window and out the front window.

“Oh, shit!” was all I could say.

“What the fuck happened?” was all Morgan could say.

We were just standing there, looking at the mess at the back of the truck that was Mrs. Huffington, when everyone from the hospital came running out. I was still standing on the same position and was shaking like it was twenty below zero. I could still hear Irv in my ear, saying, “Make sure there are no mistakes because he’s been known to hold a grudge.”

When I finally realized where I was and what had happened, I went inside to call Irv and try to explain to him what had happened. I was on the phone for about fifteen minutes, and when I hung up, I went back out to look at the truck. The motor pool guys had arrived with a tour truck, and Gunnery Sergeant Sweeny—our chief investigative staff NCO—was there, interrogating Morgan to find out what went on. After he finished with him, he turned and came over to me.

“Jim, how you doing? Kind of a mess, isn’t it? I’m not just talking about the cat,” he said with a smile on his face. Now Gunny Sweeney and I were friends, but we didn’t hang out together. For some reason, staff NCOs and regular NCOs were friendly but not close buddies, and he was married and had a couple of boys. “What the hell happened?”

he asked.

I proceeded to tell him the whole story, but in the middle, he stopped and had this horrible look on his face. What he was staring at was Colonel Greene, who had just got out of his car and was walking over to where we were standing.

“What the fuck did you do, Coleman?” he was not just asking but yelling. He had that look as if he wanted to punch me as hard as he could, but he just stood there. His face was about two inches from mine, and he was yelling the same thing over and over.

Just then, a familiar voice interrupted him, “Colonel, it looks as if this was a terrible accident, but we need to question both Sergeant Coleman and Lance Corporal Morgan back at the office.” It was Capt. Irving S. Richards to my rescue.

“You better find out what the hell happened. This is not going to go away, and someone is going to stand court-martial for this. Why the hell was your riot gun in your hand anyway and loaded and cocked? Did you intend to kill the cat?” He was just beside himself. I looked at Irv, and he motioned not to answer anything.

“I’ll take care of all this, and then I’ll have a report on your desk first thing Monday morning,” Irv tried to reason with the colonel.

“Monday. Are you out of your fucking mind? I want a full and detailed report on my desk in two hours, and I want the lame excuse for a Marine standing tall in front of me at 0900 Monday. Is that understood, Captain?” he said *captain* with all the disdain he could muster. He then just turned, glaring at me, and went to his car. But before he got in, he yelled over to us, “Richards, you and your puppet better get your ass out to my house and explain to my wife how your boy there killed her cat. That should be fun.” He sped out of the driveway.

“This is not going to end pretty,” Irv said to probably no one, but everyone heard him. “You better go back to the barracks and change. You’ve got cat guts all over your uniform. I’ll pick you up in thirty minutes, and we’ll go out there and get it over with.”

I went back to the office first, stowed my weapon, and then signed out and went to my room in the barracks. As I got to the barracks, about six guys were just standing at the entrance, waiting for me.

“Did you really kill the colonel’s pussycat?” one of them asked.

“Yes, I did.” I tried to keep walking.

“What the hell’s going to happen, Jim?” another one asked.

“Have no idea. I have to go to his house with Captain Richards and really piss off his wife. That fucking thing meant everything in the world to her. It’s not like I meant to do it, but it was coming right for my eyes. I just reacted.”

“More like overreacted,” another friendly voice from inside the barracks said. It was 1st Lt. Homer Stasky. He was Colonel Greene’s able adjutant. He was someone you really didn’t want as an enemy, but that seemed to be water under the bridge.

“Didn’t the colonel order you to go to his house and tell his wife what despicable thing you’ve done to her Mrs. Huffington?”

“Yes, sir. I thought I’d change out of this uniform with all the crap all over it and clean myself up before my captain and I go to the colonel’s house.”

“Did the colonel tell you to change, or did he order you to go to his house?”

“I thought I’d—” I was cut off in mid-sentence.

“Thought. If you had thought about anything, you wouldn’t be in this predicament. It seems, Coleman, you don’t think about anything but yourself. Just like the time you stopped me at the gate and had me wait outside in the rain while you and your stooges went through my car. You came to this base under questionable circumstances. No one knows who you are or what you’ve done to warrant your rank, but here you are. Now you’ve really fucked up, and you are going to pay for it. No one can save you. Be at the colonel’s house in ten minutes with the uniform you have on, or you’ll be up on more charges, this one being defying a direct order.”

I decided to call Irv and tell him about my encounter with Stasky and what I should do about it or even what should I expect from this shooting. I couldn't reach him, so I got in my car, without changing uniforms, and drove to the office to pick Irv up and drive to the colonel's house. As I was pulling into the parking lot, Irv came out of the office, and he really didn't look happy.

"Are you trying to end up in the brig?" he shouted as he was getting in the car.

"What are you talking about?"

"Stasky just called me and said that you refused to leave the uniform on that you were wearing and that he had to threaten you with disobeying a direct order for you to acquiesce. You know he hates you, so why are you giving him any excuse to throw you in the brig?"

"Captain, I never refused changing my clothes. I said to him that I thought it would look better to Mrs. Greene not seeing the pits and pieces of her cat all over me, but he didn't agree and ordered me to change. As you see, I didn't. Another thing, he's really still upset that I stopped him at the gate one night and that we went through his car looking for contraband."

"Did he say that to you? Did anyone hear him?"

"Yes, he did, and no one heard him. We were standing outside the entrance, and no one came in or out."

"Okay, this is what's going to happen. Tomorrow, you're going to stand office hours or non-judicial punishment in front of the colonel for not securing your vehicle at his house. You have the right to refuse NJP and request a court-martial, but I know where that will get you. I guess the colonel or Stasky got to Morgan and threatened him with brig time if he lied. Morgan is really feeling badly about this, and he doesn't know what to do to make it up to you. With office hours, you'll probably be confined to base for thirty days or maybe even sixty, but that should be it. You definitely won't get brig time because that would have to go to court-martial. He could take a stripe away, but I really doubt it."

We got to the colonel's house, and Lieutenant Stasky was standing out front, waiting to see what I was wearing. As I got out of the car, I could see that he was very pleased with himself, and he got into his car and drove away.

As we started toward the front door, it opened, and Mrs. Greene was standing there, looking as if she had been crying for hours.

"Mrs. Greene—" I started to speak, but she cut me off.

"You knew when you came in here that you were going to kill Mrs. Huffington. That cat didn't deserve to die like that. If I had my way, I would send you to federal prison for this." She started to cry all over again.

"Mrs. Greene, I am terribly sorry for what happened, and I wish I could take it all back." Irv motioned me to turn and go back to the car.

"That went better than I thought I would," I said to the captain as we were driving back to base.

"You think that went well? Are you crazy? That's the colonel's wife. She owned the cat, but even worse, she will be at him all night and in the morning about what he should do to you. Do you think that's going to go well with your case? You just don't know women. They're like an infection that you just can't get rid of, and that's from someone who has been married for over twenty years and loves his wife without question."

As we came into the parking lot, I really wasn't feeling so well. A stupid crazy cat was the reason that I was in all this trouble, and me doing my job was the other reason. If this was the way the Marine Corps work, then I didn't want anything to do with them. I'd just do my remaining tour. then I'd get out and say goodbye to something I loved, but now I really didn't know.

The next morning, I was dressed in my best winter green uniform and shoes—spotless. I drove to headquarters to face the music. As I got out of the car, Irv was standing on the walkway.

"Do you think I'd let you face this alone? I can't go in with you, but

I'll be right outside. I had a long talk or let me say as long as you can with the colonel, and I tried to explain everything to him. Also, the report came back from the vet, and from the pieces they examined, Mrs. Huffington was rabid and couldn't have been saved even if the shooting didn't happen. That's on your side, but he's still not happy with you. He did bring up the Stasky thing, but I said that should have nothing to do with what happened on Saturday."

We walked into the main office, and Lieutenant Stasky was standing by the colonel's door. "The colonel will be with you shortly." No smile, no nothing. Just matter of fact and he knew he had me.

We waited for twenty minutes, and Irv leaned over and said that they were just making me sweat and advised me not to worry about anything.

All of a sudden, Stasky yelled, "The colonel will see you now, Corporal . . . sorry, Sergeant."

I stood straight and marched into the colonel's office and came to a stop right in front of his desk. I then said in a commanding voice, "Sergeant Coleman reporting as ordered, sir." Usually, the officer that you're reporting to will tell you "At ease," but this didn't happen now.

"Sergeant, you are being charged with failing to secure your vehicle when there are loaded weapons in them, which is Article 27 of the MCAS Military Police Protocol. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty, sir." I couldn't deny it because he already had Morgan's statement, and if I lied, it would be worse.

"Do you have anything to say before I give you your punishment?" He looked a lot madder than he did yesterday. I thought for a second to apologize for shooting his fucking cat, but then I thought against it because it would just piss him off even more.

"No, sir," I said with conviction.

"Then my judgment is that you be confined to this base for sixty days and that you be demoted one pay grade effective immediately. You're dismissed, Corporal." He swung his chair around so he wouldn't

look at me.

I was stunned. I expected the confinement, maybe not sixty days but at least thirty days. But to be demoted was unexpected. I knew in my mind it wasn't warranted. I did a perfect about-face and walked straight out of the colonel's office and then out of the building, not stopping to talk to Irv.

"What happened?" Irv was chasing me to the parking lot.

I was so mad I wanted to cry, but I tried to hold it in, and I said, "Fuck this man's Marine Corps. He busted me down to corporal for shooting his fucking rabid cat. I should get rabies from that thing rather than shoot him for coming at my face. Fuck him, his kiss ass adjutant, and fuck the Marine Corps. I got a year and half left. I'll do it the best I can, and then I'm out. They have me killing fucking strangers, and no one says anything. But I kill that fucking animal, and I'm the villain. Well, thank you very much, but I'm done. No more killings and no more Marine Corps. I'll do my sixty days, and then don't ask me to do anything again. I've had it with you and everyone else in this fucking place." I jumped into my car and left about five miles of rubber getting out of the parking lot.

The rest of the day, I spent taking my chevrons off my uniforms and then going out to town to have my corporal strips put back on. The tailor told me that I could have one uniform that evening, and the rest would be ready the next afternoon. I drove back to my barracks and went to my room. I was lying on my back, trying to justify what just happened, when I heard a knock on my door. I got back to reality.

"Come in," I said softly.

"Jim, can we talk?" It was Morgan, and he looked as if he had been crying.

"Grab a chair and sit down," I wanted to yell at him, but after looking at him and thinking of what he was going through, I couldn't.

"Jim, I'm really sorry. I know I should have said that we secured the truck, but Stasky threatened me that if I lied, I would be in the brig for at least sixty days. I didn't know what to do. So I told him I didn't

think we secured it, but I wasn't sure."

"You had to tell the truth, and it was my duty as sergeant of the guard to have secured it, not yours. I'm sorry I got you confined to base. At least this won't be on your permanent record. Someday I'll fix Stasky, but not right now. Hopefully, I'll catch him doing something wrong, and I can arrest him. But he has his nose two feet up the colonel's ass, who knows?"

"Jim, I just wanted to say how sorry I am, and if there is anything I can do, please just tell me." He got out of his chair and extended his hand. I grabbed it and shook it as hard as I could and told him not to worry.

The rest of the night was really restless because all I could think of was Diem, Spigarelli, and what had happened in Cuba. I tossed and turned, and I got only about three hours of sleep. I was due on duty at 0600 hours, but I got up at 0430 and decided I'd go for a run and try to get this awful feeling out of my mind.

As I was running, I thought of the two men I killed and thought of how I didn't even know them and what had they done against the United States. Diem was a president of a country that the US had put him in power, and now because he was upsetting the Buddhist, he had to die? And Spigarelli killed a president, or so they said, but did he deserve to just be killed and not come to trial like all the other gangsters? What were they turning me into? A killer or, better still, a word the Marines or even the United States didn't like to use—an assassin. And for what, so the CIA could look good.

No one knew anything, and I couldn't say anything. Now I killed a fucking cat, and I got the shit thrown at me, with no one to say what I'd done for the country and the Marine Corps. I was just another number, and if I died, they'd get someone else to do their dirty work. Well, I'd just not going to do it anymore, and I didn't care if they kicked me out and if anyone asked me any questions of what I'd done. I'd be telling them.

I reported for duty at 0545 and was told that I would be at the main

gate starting at 0900. Also, I was told that Captain Richards wanted me at his house at 0800 hours and not to be late. I did some of the paperwork that I hadn't done after the incident, and at 0745, I headed for Irv's house, which was over Laurel Bay.

As I approached the front door, it opened, and Captain Richards was standing at the opening. "Jim, I'm really sorry for what happened. I never saw this coming, and if you want, we can appeal and go to court-martial."

"No, I don't want that because I could end up getting something worse. I just want to do my time on base and then get leave to go home and possibly get married. You know I was thinking that Linda will have her prom on May 29, and today is April 21. So you see, that's less than sixty days. If I tell her I can't take her, she will absolutely kick me to the curb. But I don't see any other solution."

"Let me worry about that, no you," Irv said, but then he dropped the bomb. "What's this about killing people?"

"What do you mean killing people?" I asked with as much surprise that I could muster.

"You said when you left the colonel's office while we were at the parking lot. You said you are killing strangers for the Marine Corps. What's that all about?"

"Oh, I was just mad at the time. It didn't mean anything."

"Killing strangers is everything. You just don't come out with that because you're mad. It had to mean something, and I would like to know what it meant."

"I meant that they are probably going to send me to Vietnam to kill a bunch of strangers, and they have a shit fit because I killed a cat. That's all it meant." I was trying to think fast on my feet.

"You are sure. It really sounded a lot different when you said it yesterday. But okay, I'll let it go. How are you doing? Do you want some breakfast? My wife just cooked a bunch of hotcakes, and there are extras. You should have a good breakfast, and I want to talk to

you about something else. Stasky will be going through the main gate or any other gate you're on to see if he can rattle you or if you'll do something stupid to him so he can really get you. What you have to do is just put it out of your mind and let it go. I've found in all the years I've been in this man's Marine Corps that the old saying stands, 'Chickens do come home to roost.' Meaning that the longer you wait, you always get even no matter how long. Have you spoken to Morgan yet? You guys all right?"

"Yes, sir. I spoke to him last night in my room for about thirty minutes, and we're fine. He couldn't help what happened. It wasn't the colonel who threatened him, but it was Stasky. And I know what you mean somewhere and sometime down the road, I will get even."

We had some pancakes or, as Irv puts it, "hotcakes," and they were good. His kids came down to say goodbye to him before they went to school, and believe me, his oldest daughter who was in senior in high school was really looking good. I thought there might be something wrong with me for always looking at high school seniors. I thought of that and just laughed to myself. I left Irv's house and went back to the office and got a set of keys to a truck and checked out my riot gun. As I took it, the armorer said, "Jim, make sure you lock the truck this time." He shook his head in disgust.

For the rest of the week, it went rather smoothly. I never did see the colonel or Stasky, but I did see the captain's daughter at the guard shack in front of Laurel Bay a number of times. She was always asking me for a ride home. It wasn't my job to do that, but I got one of the extra guards to do it. When they came back, an interesting thing was mentioned.

"Have you ever driven the captain's daughter home from here?" the private asked as he came back into the guard shack.

"No, but I've been asked a number of times. But it's not my job, and I have to go by the regulations more now because of what has happened as the rest of us have too. Why do you ask?"

"Well, we got into the truck and started down Laurel Bay Blvd.,

and halfway down, she asked me if I wanted a blow job?"

"What did you say?" I asked, half in shock and half for curiosity sake.

"She said if I didn't let her, she was going to tell her father that I molested her. What the fuck was I supposed to do? I let her."

The other guard piped up, "Was it any good?"

"Fantastic. When I dropped her off at her house on Althea, she said we'd get together again."

"No, you won't. Do you know what would happen to you if her father found out? He'd kill you or have to transfer to the worst duty station ever. Tell me something. Has anyone here ever fucked her?"

"Not that I know of," the private who drove her said, and he was believable.

"I'll handle this. The next time she's here, call me, and I'll take her home. I know what ya'll are thinking. No, I'm not going to get a blow job, but I'm going to put the fear of God into that young lady."

The next day, I get a call from the Laurel Bay guard shack, "Ms. Richards is here and would like a ride to her home. But we are really busy, so can you take care of this, Corporal?"

"I'll be there in about five minutes," I said, and now I had to think how I could make her stop doing this to MPs and not get in trouble with her father.

"Get in, and I'll take you home. What's your name? Are you the oldest of the Richards family?" I was trying to ease into what I would have to say.

"You know my name. It's Mary Elizabeth Richards, and I'm almost seventeen. I'm a junior at Beaufort High School, and I'm a cheerleader. I know your name, and I know what you did to get busted. Shot the colonel's cat. How utterly barbaric."

She got in and sat a little too close to me to look that innocent. "Move over, please. Look, like this is a military vehicle, and we're not going to the drive-in. Barbaric—that's a clever word. Do you actually

know what that means?"

"I know you got into a lot of trouble with that, and if you don't let me blow you, I will tell my father. He will have you sent to prison. You know I'm below the age of consent, and in this state, that's rape."

"Oh, you mean, have oral sex with you? I don't think so, and Mary Elizabeth, I have at least ten Marines who will tell your father that you propositioned them into letting you blow them. How would your father feel about that? I'm sure I can find some more boys in your school who will also testify against you. You're not fucking around with an amateur, Mary Elizabeth. Don't you think I knew what you'd pull if I picked you up, and don't you think I came prepared?" I took out a tape recorder, which I had under my seat, and it recorded everything.

"Now this is what you're going to do from now on. First, you are never to come to the guard shack and ask or demand a ride home, unless your father has approved it well before. Second, you are never to engage in any conversation with a Marine MP that's on the Laurel Bay gate or patrol. If you do, I will send this tape to Captain Richards, your father, and see how he handles it. Do you know by your actions that you and your family could be kicked out of Laurel Bay and be forced to live in town with all those civilians? How would your father go for that? Now, Mary Elizabeth, what's it going to be? A pleasant ride home, or do I just drive right to your father's office? Your call."

She sat there fuming, looking straight out the window and about three seconds away from crying her eyes out. She was a tough girl. She didn't cry, but you could tell that she was trying to think of a way that she was going to win. But she couldn't.

"I'll do what you want. You can take me home."

"And just to be sure you don't pull anything, I'll walk you to your door and ask to see your mother. Is that okay with you? If she asks if there's a problem, you say it's about some boy in your class. Nothing more, nothing less. Is that understood? I will have no problem telling your father about what's going on, and I have the tape to substantiate my accusations.

“Why are you being so mean? I wasn’t hurting anyone, and the boys seemed to like it.”

“You know, Mary Elizabeth, I’m no shrink, but I don’t think you have to do that to get a boy. You’re a very pretty girl, and if you just treat them right and act like a lady, you’ll have a lot of boys chasing you. If you give it away, like you’ve been doing, then you’re nothing but a whore.”

Her head snapped, looking at me with all the hatred she could muster. “I never fucked anyone in my life, and I’m not a whore, you fucking cat killer.” She jumped out of the truck and ran to the door, crying. I followed her to the front door.

“Is everything all right, Jim?” Mrs. Richards was at the front door as Mary Elizabeth ran by.

“Everything is fine, Mrs. Richards. I think it’s just a little puppy love at school.”

When I left the Richards’s house, I pulled over in the elementary school parking lot, and I started to listen to the tape. It was very incriminating. I stopped at the guard shack at the entrance to Laurel Bay and told all the guys there that “blow job city was now closed.” They had nothing to worry about, and Ms. Richards wasn’t going to tell anyone about any improprieties, especially her father. When I got back to the office, I assembled all the other MPs and told them the same thing. You could just see the relief come over their faces.

I still hadn’t told Linda that it looked as if I wasn’t going to be able to take her to her senior prom, and time was running out. I had to do something because it was already April 22, and the prom was only thirty-seven more days. I started to think that if I just left on a Thursday and came back on Sunday, would I be caught, and how much trouble I would be in?

Now I knew the lieutenant was watching my every move, and I imagined he was reporting to the colonel about what I was doing. Irv intentionally kept me off gate duty at the air station so I wouldn’t run into him, and he limited my patrolling Laurel Bay, except when the

lieutenant was on duty. With this, I couldn't get into trouble.

Also, investigations were still going on regarding the stealing of dry goods from the mess hall. Everyone knew it was being done, but no one seemed to know who or how it was being taken off base. We tried everything. We would stop all the cars at night and search every vehicle. We would drop into the mess hall and do an inventory at any time of the day or night. Nothing. But when the end of the month came, cases of inventory were missing. I really didn't have time for that, and I had to figure out a way to get home for the prom.

I would speak to Linda almost every night, and she sounded so excited. Also, she would tell me the plans for everyone for that weekend. "We have the prom on Friday night, and then all the kids will go to the Cape for Saturday and Sunday. On Saturday night, everyone will sleep on the beach in Hyannis and will head back home on Sunday afternoon." She was so excited, and all I could think about while she was talking was how I was going to ruin her final days of high school. I decided I would ask Irv for emergency leave for the weekend, but I had to come up with the perfect reason so it would be granted—just going to the prom would do it.

After a couple of days thinking about what I was going to say to the captain, it was time to put my plan into operation. I couldn't flinch or look like I was lying because he would know right away it was a lie. I had come up with the idea that I needed to go home that weekend because Linda was pregnant and that we had to get married before her parents found out about the baby. I had to sell it, or I was dead in his eyes forever.

"Captain, may I have a word when you're not busy?" I asked with maybe a little hesitation in my voice.

"Yes, Jim, come in. I need to tell you something also."

"What is it that you have to tell me, sir?"

There was a very large envelope on his desk, and I could see, even upside down, that my name was on it. I had decided to let him speak first, and then I would go from there, judging in what mood he was in.

"I have orders here for you for overseas. You're being transferred to Iwakuni, Japan, but everyone knows it's just a ploy for telling you Vietnam. No major forces are there yet, but it looks like it's just a matter of time. Jim, it's been a really great pleasure having you here, and I'm really sorry for what happened a few weeks ago. I'm sure you'll get your stripe back in no time. Just do your job as well as you've done it here, and please stay away from those Japanese cats." He let out a little laugh, hoping I would join in, which I did.

"When are these orders effective, sir?" I was a little stunned, but if they were immediate and I got the regular thirty-day leave prior to reporting, then everything back home would work out.

"They are effective immediately. I will put off your departure from MCAS Beaufort for Friday, the first of May, and you report to Camp Pendleton on Sunday, June 7, on or before 1800 hours. These are your orders here on my desk, but I'm going to keep them here for a couple of days. Make sure you take care of all the important things this week like returning your rifle to the armory and your side arm also. I will take you off the duty roster for the week, but I can use you here with me to try to figure out the mess at the mess hall. Now what did you have to ask me?"

"It was nothing, sir. With this news, everything is working out, not as planned, but it's working out anyway. I know Linda will be thrilled that I'm going to be home all that time, but I'm not really sure how she'll feel with me being away for that long of a time. I want to thank you, sir, for everything you've done for me, and I hope in the future before I get out, we can serve again together." I turned and started to leave before he saw the tears in my eyes.

"Before you go, I told my wife you were leaving, and we'd love to have you out for supper one of these nights this week. You pick the night, and we'll make it happen. I'll invite Audrey and a couple of other people that you want. Let me know. Now get out of here and get ready to leave. And, Jim, thank you." I hadn't turned around and just waived while going through the door.

“So you’re going to Iwakuni?” Audrey asked with a little sarcasm. “I’ve always wanted to go there, but they aren’t sending any WMs out of country now because of Vietnam and how it could kick off at any moment. I don’t know how being in Japan has anything to do with the other.”

“Don’t ask me because it’s really way above my pay grade. Do you have a list of things to do when someone is being transferred? I know you do when someone is getting out altogether.”

“I’ll give you that one because you have to give back what you got when you got here, and there are reminders of what may be off base like the cleaners. Here, take it, and if it doesn’t help, call me.”

I left the office in a very good mood, but that was about to change in a quick hurry. One of my first items on the list was to go to headquarters and get a new ID card and turn in my old one that showed I was an MP at MCAS Beaufort. As I entered the building and walked toward the main lobby, Lieutenant Stasky came out of an office right in front of me, and I almost knocked him over.

“In a hurry to get out of here, Coleman?” he asked with his usual electric personality.

“No, sir. Just doing what I have to do before I transfer out of here.”

“That’s right. I just heard you’re being transferred to Iwakuni.”

“Yes, sir, and I’d like to say it’s been a real pleasure being stationed with you,” I said with all the sarcasm I could muster.

“Well, Corporal. You won’t have to worry about saying goodbye to me because I also just received orders to report to Iwakuni also, so we’ll be together for at least another thirteen months. Now won’t that be fun?”

“Shit, oh I mean, sir?” I didn’t know what to say, but the first part of that sentence wasn’t it. I could tell in his face that he really was enjoying this.

“Definitely right, Corporal. It is oh, shit for you and happy days for me. I can tell we’ll have so much fun in Japan. I can’t wait for you to

get there. If there is a God in this man's Marine Corps, you'll be under my command." He turned and walked away, laughing.

"Oh well, I'm not going to let that get me down." I continued to the front desk to get my new ID.

By the end of the week, I was on my way home and had at least thirty days to see everyone and try to get Linda on board for me being away that long of a time. She was planning on going to the University of Massachusetts in Boston in a renovated building in Park Square, so she'd be close to home and close to my parents also. Since we'd become sort of engaged, Linda had spent a few weekends at my folk's house, and I knew they both loved her as much as I did.

The rest of the week went by without incident, and Friday was quickly coming but not quickly enough. The captain told me that he and his wife would like to throw a party for me on Wednesday night, and then the guys in our unit were going to throw a going-away party on Thursday night, which meant a wild drunk.

The captain called me into his office on Wednesday afternoon, and he really didn't look happy. "You and my daughter, Mary Elizabeth, ever have words, or did you have any trouble with her?"

"No, not that I can think of. Just that one day when I drove her home, she was having boy trouble in school. I tried to give her some brotherly advice, but she didn't seem to want it," I was trying not to make it sound serious.

"Well, she says if you come to dinner tonight, she won't be there because, as she put it, 'I hate his guts.' Now that doesn't sound like something having to do with brotherly advice. Does it to you?"

"Believe me, sir. It's nothing. I'd rather not say and just leave it where it lies. I don't have to have a going-away dinner because you've done more than enough for me." But I knew I wasn't going to get away with just this.

"Jim, Corporal, I need to know what is going on, and I need to know now," again, he didn't sound too happy.

"I really don't know if this is the reason, but after I had been at your house a number of times, it seemed that your daughter would go out of her way to ask to have me, and only me, drive her home from the main gate at Laurel Bay. After about three times, I asked her directly if she had a crush on me, and I think I really embarrassed her. Then I went on to tell her that I was much too old and that she should concentrate on the boys in high school. That was when she ran out of the truck and ran past your wife. I didn't mean to embarrass her, but it was the only thing I could think of at the time. I'm really not sure it was true. When she ran out of the truck, she told me she hated me, so I thought maybe I was right. Captain Irv, please don't embarrass her more by questioning her about this. Just let it lay, and we'll cancel for tonight." I stood, hoping he'd listen to me because I really didn't want to tell him the truth about his daughter. I knew he wouldn't understand, and it wouldn't go well for me.

"If that's what you want, then okay. I'll have Audrey tell the others, and I'm really sorry we won't be able to get together this last time and raise a glass or two to your new duty station."

"Oh, by the way, did you know that Lieutenant Stasky is also being transferred to Iwakuni? I ran into him the other day, and he was almost giddy in telling me."

"I found out yesterday, but you hadn't mentioned it. I didn't want to ruin the rest of your days here. Just do your job, Jim, and there's nothing he can do to you. You'll probably not be in his unit anyway. Just go over there, and have a really good time. I'll see you Friday before you leave?" I turned and exited his office, thinking I'd really dodged a bullet.

Thursday night came, and they had the going-away party at Audrey's house. The guys came from off duty and drank as quickly as they could to catch up with the ones who'd been there for some time. I arrived later than I thought I would because I was saying goodbye to a few of my friends in other units I had met during the day with Gunny Abbott, the chief investigator for the mess hall.

Talking about the stealing at the mess hall, that case was going nowhere. Gunny said he knew that one of the cooks or even the lieutenant who was in charge was taking the stuff, but he didn't know how they got it out or what they were doing with it once it was outside. The big items seemed to be cases of peanut butter and diced tomatoes. I asked him if at all possible to keep me up to date while I was in Japan because I'd love to know who was finally caught and what happened to the items.

We had an inspection Friday morning, and everyone who wasn't working the late shift the night before had a lousy hangover. I hadn't packed my uniform because I wasn't let go until 1200 hours on Friday. So that meant I was still part of the unit and still had to stand inspection. Luckily, we had a Major Williams doing the inspection who was very fond of the military police unit because his wife had an asthma attack one morning a few months ago, and the MPs got her to the hospital just in time. The inspection lasted five minutes, and when the major came in front of me, he offered his hand and said, "It's been a pleasure, Corporal. You really got screwed on the cat case, but chin up. You'll do all right in Japan." Then he moved on. I did have a few friends in high places here at MCAS Beaufort.

I changed out of my uniform, folded it, and placed it in my duffel bag. I then threw that in the trunk of my car. I looked over my room, found nothing that I'd forgotten, and headed for the car and on to Boston. As I approached the main gate, there were about twenty guys from my unit standing in a company front. As I drove by, they saluted me and then waved goodbye. I couldn't help thinking that I would never be in a unit that had been so tight as this one.

"Jim, Jim. Are you sleeping? Time to go to bed." It was my wife who just got home from her night out with the girls. "You must have been dreaming because you had the craziest grin on your face."

"I'll be up in a minute, hon. I'm just going to close my eyes for another second." I tried to remember a little bit more.

(To Be Continued)

