

# CHAPTER 1

## ***Biloxi, Mississippi, August 16, 1993***

Wooden blades slapped the dark, still water, pulling a flat-bottomed skiff across the Biloxi Bay. Jake crouched low at the bow and trained his eyes on a single white light ahead. His younger brother Pigeon worked the oars. Both were in their early twenties, lean and muscular. A single black skimmer glided over the water, beating its wings past the boat through the summer's thick, humid air. No moon or stars filled the midnight sky, just as the brothers had hoped. They had a task to do, a score to settle.

At the far end of the bay, six hundred yards off Deer Island, a trawler rested at anchor. From its boom, a bright halogen beam lit up huge nets hanging from outriggers on either side of the vessel. With forty-two feet at the waterline, she had the classic, graceful lines of a Gulf Coast shrimper. Across the transom and bow, the name *Miss Anh* arched in newly gilded letters. Her gold nameboard, green pilothouse, and red hull presented a semblance of Christmas.

Jake felt the gentle vibration of an electric generator as he grabbed the trawler's anchor line to steady the skiff. Without a sound, Pigeon stowed the oars and pulled on heavy knit gloves. He dragged a canvas sack from beneath his seat and gave it to Jake. Sweat beaded on Pigeon's brow and

ran into the corners of his eyes. He eased himself over the skiff's gunwale and into the warm bay. Jake pulled a length of cable—looped at each end—out of the sack. Holding on to one end of the coil, he handed the remainder over the side. For a moment, the heavy wire dragged Pigeon's head underwater.

“Gimme that float,” Pigeon mouthed as he struggled at the surface.

Jake tossed a square white seat cushion to his brother. Pigeon trapped the pad under his arm then played out the cable with one hand as he side-kicked along the hull of the *Miss Anh*. At the stern, he grabbed a tire bumper hanging from the back rail to rest a moment. Looking up to the transom and the new golden letters, he mumbled, “Those bastards.” Then he took a deep breath, released the cushion, and sank into the inky water.

The brothers had been raised on the Mississippi Gulf Coast since they were teenagers and had spent most of their days helping their father run this same boat. They knew every cleat and line, every block and winch, and every seam of its wooden hull.

The free end of the cable pulled on Pigeon's arm as he made his way, by memory and feel, down six feet to the propeller. In the darkness, he guided the wire loop around the prop shaft and over one of the brass blades. Pigeon jerked twice on the cable to signal Jake that his job was complete.

Jake secured the other end of the cable to the two-inch line leading to the trawler's anchor—fifteen feet below and fast in the muddy bottom of the bay. He then let his end of the cable slide down the rope and under the surface. The cable now hung beneath the *Miss Anh* from anchor line to propeller.

Moments later, Pigeon popped up on the far side of the skiff with a loud gasp for air. His wet blond hair draped over his face. Breathless, he grabbed the rail with both hands.

“Dammit, git in,” Jake whispered as he scrambled to help Pigeon climb into the small boat. “Git in.”

Pigeon put his foot on the lower end of an outboard motor and flipped over the stern, landing shoulder-first at the bottom of the boat. “Shit,” he hissed, then squirmed onto the stern thwart.

Jake set the oars, spun the skiff, and pulled away from the trawler with jerking strokes. Darkness filled the quickly expanding space between trawler and skiff. When they were out of earshot, Pigeon fired up the outboard, handled the tiller, and motored toward the Point—toward the mainland shore where casino lights cast brilliant purple, green, and yellow streaks across the smooth water.

The skiff drew a V-shaped wake as it skimmed under the highway drawbridge and around Point Cadet. The brothers followed the channel markers, red and green, into Back Bay. They passed boatyards and dry docks filled with schooners, catboats, prams, and cabin cruisers; aging warehouses left dilapidated after long-forgotten storms; colorful shrimp boats tied up to docks with their outriggers pointing to the night sky; and shrimp packing plants with darkened windows and empty lots. On the Point, behind the wharves, plants, and boatyards was a tidy neighborhood of small clapboard houses arranged in blocks going north, south, east, and west. For three centuries, successive waves of immigrant fishermen and their families—the Spanish, the French, the Yugoslavs, and the Vietnamese—occupied this low-lying spit of land between the bays.

The brothers glided by bulkheads protecting the broad lawns of stately homes and private docks jutting out into the shallow water. Six-inch round Styrofoam balls, floating on the surface and painted in colorful patterns to claim the crab traps below, slipped by. Further up the channel, where Back Bay narrowed, a thick strip of salt grass abutted the dark pine forest at the water's edge, obscuring the transition from land to sea. Thin crosscut canals in the dull marsh, leading to shacks hidden in the woods, flashed with reflected light as the boat passed.

Hours before daybreak, before the release of the Coast's nighttime slumber and stillness, Pigeon ran the skiff through a narrow cut in the salt grass and onto the muddy bank of an old fishing camp their father used to rent.

On impact, Jake lurched forward in the boat. *It wasn't right*, he thought. Then he pulled a slight smile over his face as he reconciled with what was to become of the *Miss Anh* in just a few hours.

# CHAPTER 2

## ***Da Nang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, December 13, 1970***

Senior Airman Rex Thompson stepped out of a Quonset hut into the midday heat and humidity of Southeast Asia. An acrid smell of burnt jet fuel and a wet-dog stink of stagnant water hung heavy in the air. Rex walked a muddy path flanked by walls of dirty-white sandbags. The rumble of jet engines, the beat of helicopter rotors, and the echo of bombs beyond distant hills made it impossible to ignore the battle being choreographed around him.

Rex had an easy smile, many acquaintances, but few friends. On this, his second tour in Vietnam, he had just marked his twenty-third birthday. His first stint began after the Tet Offensive in 1968 at the Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon and lasted for one year. This time the Air Force sent him to the 366<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing at the Da Nang Air Base, one hundred and sixty kilometers south of the Demilitarized Zone and the North Vietnamese Army.

Rex entered a wooden building, ducking through the door into a small room his unit shared with the South Vietnamese airmen. A whiff of fermented *nuoc mam*, like rotting fish, hit Rex as soon as he entered. “Damn dinks,” he said aloud to nobody but himself.

Burned-out bulbs and sticky yellow tape hung from a low ceiling. Except for scattered wooden tables, chairs, and a small kitchenette, the area was empty. Dirty pots and tin plates littered the countertops. Flies, not yet stuck to the yellow tape, buzzed. For Rex, sharing this dining room with Asians now touched a nerve. The feeling of excitement and bravado for fighting a war halfway around the globe for a country and a cause he did not understand had left him. He grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and slipped out.

Back inside the Quonset hut, Rex knocked the mud off his boots, sipped his soda, and sat down at his desk to a stack of papers. A small tabletop fan spun hot air into his face. Surrounding him were a dozen steel tables with wooden chairs in two rows facing the door. All were empty. It was Sunday; the supply office should have been shut.

Another fighter jet took off with a growl to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the A Shaw Valley, Cambodia, or elsewhere. Rex didn't care. The building rattled and then quieted again to the buzz of his fan.

From his shirt pocket, Rex removed an airmail envelope and held it at arm's length. He had been carrying the letter around for the past week, unopened. The note was another from Deborah in Galveston, his once-girlfriend, who claimed he was the father of her newborn son. Rex drew the envelope to his nose. It lacked a scent of perfume, unlike the first several letters he received from her and had not answered. He tore the envelope in half, in quarters, then tossed the pieces into a galvanized can next to his desk.

Rex slumped in his chair and looked around the room. Two small windows flanked the front entrance. A separate door at the other end of the building led to a back office. The two featureless, corrugated steel sidewalls of the hut curved overhead to meet at the top. *I work upside-down in a god-damn pig trough*, he thought. A mortar round then popped somewhere up the river valley, far away. He shuddered, and his fingertips tingled. Ten months *up-country* near the DMZ, he felt his nerves unraveling.

He pulled a drawer entirely out of his desk and removed an envelope taped to the back. Within the fold were a key and a scrap of paper with a six-digit number. He spun the key between his thumb and forefinger for

several minutes. Nobody had come to the supply office all morning, and he expected nobody would.

Rex rose from his chair, opened the back office door with the key, and flipped on the light. The room was empty except for a large wooden desk, three metal chairs, and a three-foot-square safe on the floor. He closed the door behind him, pulled up a seat, and spun the dial to the combination he had committed to memory. The steel door opened with a click.

Inside was a single shoebox containing stacks of crisp twenty-dollar bills. Purple paper bands held bundles of two thousand dollars each—twenty-three bundles, forty-six thousand dollars.

Rex paused to listen and heard nothing but the hum of his fan outside the door. He grabbed a nylon mail pouch off the floor and stuffed it with the cash. He zipped the bag, locked the safe, and wiped the dial and handle with his shirttail. The room was quiet. Rex turned to leave and noticed a framed photo of his master sergeant and family posing at some vacation lakefront on the desk. Mom, dad, sister, and little brother—the whole clan in swimsuits and life vests—all seemed to be looking right at him. Feeling a chill, Rex slipped the pouch under his arm and straightened his fatigues. He opened the office door and stepped into the main room.

Captain Nguyen Duc Dung halted halfway up the aisle between the desks when the door opened. He saw Rex emerge from a room in which he had no business.

“*Trời ơi!*” Captain Dung said.

The men paused, facing each other, only ten feet apart—Rex a head taller.

The South Vietnamese Army liaison officer stood with his head held high, shoulders pulled back, and arms akimbo. His presence in the supply office surprised Rex. Dung rarely came to this part of the base—and never on Sunday.

“What you doing?” Dung asked in English. Years of combat and military training in his war-torn country had fixed in him a profound sense of right and wrong. He suspected a wrong.

“Uh, just workin’, sir,” Rex shot back, trying to act calm.

“You lie, Thompson.”

“Captain Dung, my unit got the day off, all but me.” Rex omitted that he was currently on a punitive detail for insubordination.

“Nonsense.”

“Just locking things up, sir,” Rex said as he stepped toward the outside door.

Dung grabbed Rex’s elbow with a firm grip when he tried to pass. “Sit down, airman.”

Rex was a year or two younger than Captain Dung. He could have overpowered Dung and bolted through the door. *Play it cool*, he thought, and he sat. Dung had not yet discovered his crime.

Dung snatched the pouch from Rex’s arms. “What’s this?” He opened the zipper and emptied the cash on a nearby desk. Dung took a step back, unsnapped his leather holster, and palmed the handle of his sidearm. The whirl of the desk fan made the edges of the bills flutter. The beat of a nearby helicopter measured out time in short intervals, escalating the tension in the room. Both men knew the US government had sent this money to the South Vietnamese Army for their use. It was now evident to Captain Dung that he had intercepted a crime, and he was obliged to report Rex to the Air Force command; Rex would be court-martialed and sent home in chains.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“Sir, I found the safe open,” Rex said. “Someone left it unlocked. There was money—”

“Shut up.”

“Captain, I didn’t know who unlocked the safe. I was fixing to take the money over to headquarters where they’d keep it ’till tomorrow and . . .” Rex started to ramble before he realized he was digging a hole with his story. The room seemed to heat up, and sweat dripped down the back of his neck.

For the past few months, a strained relationship had festered between the South Vietnamese and the American military in Da Nang. Captain Dung’s mind raced. He thought about the Vietnamese girl—young, only thirteen—raped by an American lieutenant. She was a colonel’s daughter, well-connected. Watching the accused stand trial forced her family’s pain

deep into his mind. Dung didn't know the colonel or the girl. He didn't know the lieutenant either. But he knew the story, and the story clung to the base like wet air.

Dung recognized the dilemma he faced. If he accused this airman of thievery, another high-profile court-martial would broaden the discord between two countries who were trying to act as allies. Furthermore, marching a US serviceman at gunpoint on the base's American side could spark a misunderstanding, a fatal firefight. Perhaps there was an innocent explanation for why this airman was carrying the cash. He thought about what would be best for South Vietnam.

Dung moved forward, placing the money in the bag and shoving it in Rex's chest. "Put back in safe, now," Dung ordered. His temples were throbbing.

"It's locked. Don't know the combination,"

"*Bullsheet.*" Dung raised his Colt .45 M1911 semi-automatic pistol and aimed it at Rex's forehead. "Don't mess with me, airman."

Rex grabbed the pouch then hustled into the back office with a muzzle pushed between his shoulder blades. He sat in front of the safe and fumbled with the combination. Three times he failed to unlock the door.

Dung became impatient. He knew the longer this dragged out, the more likely there would be trouble. "Move," Dung said. He pushed Rex aside, spun the correct numbers on the dial, and opened the safe.

"You sure 'bout this?" Rex asked. "I was figgerin', split sixty-forty? Captain Dung, ain't nobody needs to know that—"

"No. Put in box." Dung cocked the hammer of his .45 with his thumb.

Rex stacked the bundles of twenties in the safe and laid the bag on the floor. Dung reached over and pushed the door closed, locking it with a twist of its handle.

"You go now," Dung commanded as he gripped his pistol with both hands. Rex scurried down the aisle between the desks and out the door. Standing alone in the Quonset, Dung wondered if he hadn't mistaken the airman's intentions. Perhaps the safe was left open, and the GI told the truth. Or, perhaps he was stealing. Dung holstered his weapon and hoped he had made the right decision.

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