

## PROLOGUE

*Nui Ba Den, Vietnam, 1969*

This is not war, he thought; it's murder.

The first killer crouched silently along one side of the well-worn trail. His face was painted dark green with intersecting black lines to blend into the jungle. He had a razor sharp SOG Bowie knife, which he held at his side in his right hand, just slightly out in front.

The warm air was heavy with humidity. There were intermittent clouds letting through only occasional star and moonlight. A gray mist was discernible swirling lazily in the darkness about a foot or two off the ground. The whole area was shadows, dense with jungle foliage.

There was a small village up ahead about a half kilometer from his location. He could smell the wood smoke from the morning cook fires mixed in with stale odors of cattle dung and swine wallowing in their pens. He had been in-country for two tours now, much of that time spent out in the bush, and to him the smell was not unpleasant—was in fact comforting.

He concentrated on the sounds around him, the buzzing of insects and the calls of birds, the occasional howl of monkeys waking off in the distant trees.

It was early morning, probably somewhere between 3:30 and 4:00 AM. He could feel the temperature beginning to climb even though the sun was still at least a full hour from starting its rise. His fatigues clung to his body, heavy with sweat and dew from the plants he had brushed against as he moved slowly and quietly through the jungle.

He heard a soft, sharp hiss from just up ahead on the other side of the trail. It was a signal from the other killer, who also waited crouching silently in the dark.

Someone was coming.

He slowed his breathing and looked down at the ground, not wanting any light from a break in the dark clouded sky to reflect off his eyes.

He closed his eyes, squeezed them shut tight for a second and tried to concentrate on the three essential elements that could mean the difference between life and death.

Speed. Precision. Surprise.

Faint footsteps approached in the distance. The target was supposedly a VC courier that the spooks had identified. This was his preferred route, the time and day supplied by informants.

*A supposed VC courier.*

Shit. He tried to clear his mind.

The steps were rhythmic and measured. Not hurried at all, but not exactly cautious either. Not yet at least. Probably thinking he was still safe this close to the village.

The killer's fingers tightened on the hilt of his knife.

This is not war; it's murder.

That thought again, the words like a whisper echoed softly in his head.

The footsteps became more discernible as the man approached. The killer could sense more than hear the soft padding of sandals on the jungle floor, the occasional rustle of vegetation being gently pushed aside.

He had done this before. He had killed from ambush, up close and personal, with his hands, his knife, silent and deadly. He was good at it. He had done it willingly, with no remorse or regrets, understanding that it was necessary. Had even trained other men to do it.

But things had changed.

The target was getting closer.

He stood slowly, careful not to make any sound, and nestled up close to the trunk of a large Hopea tree that sat right in front of him just off the trail. He could now clearly hear the footsteps, and he put his face close to the tree, his nose almost touching, eyes open. He could smell the damp, living wood, see small ants and other insects crawling along its bark in the darkness.

The footsteps stopped. The target was standing perhaps ten or so meters away. Why had he stopped? Did he see or hear something? Could he intuit the danger he was in?

The killer waited, not breathing. He had a sidearm, his M1911 if needed, but that would alert the whole village making their evac from the area dicey. He was not alone; the killer had a small team of men to think about. He would rather eliminate the target by hand.

There was no sound for perhaps ten seconds; ten long seconds. The footsteps began again, one tentative step, then another, and then one after the other more rhythmically, though certainly more slowly than before.

He waited, still not breathing, for the man to pass. Then, in one quick motion, he stepped out from behind the tree, reached around the man's head and cupped his left hand tightly over the smaller man's mouth, pulled back hard and drew the blade of his knife across the man's exposed throat.

The man kicked and tried to scream, but the killer held tight to his head, pulling it hard to his chest, squeezing his face to muffle the noise. He could feel warm blood squirting onto his hand; hear it as it splattered like gentle raindrops on the leaves and trees and bushes all around him. He had a sudden recollection of the very first person he had killed like this, another small man in black pajamas along another trail. It had been daylight that time and he was amazed at how much blood there was, how it had squirted like a small fountain as he watched it splattering the trees several feet from where the man had fought and died there in his arms.

The struggle didn't last long. He slowly brought the man down to the ground, blood gurgling and streaming down his chest still, but no longer squirting as it did before. He kept his hand over the man's mouth but began to relax his grip.

He heard another soft, sharp hiss from up the trail. He sheathed his knife and quietly drew his sidearm from the holster at his side, never fully letting up the pressure on the target's mouth.

He was in the trail, right in the middle of it, and someone was coming. The footsteps approached quickly, like someone running, no regard to avoiding the branches and leaves along the trail, not trying at all to move silently through the jungle.

He kept one hand on the dying man's mouth and raised the gun with the other, sighting it down the trail from where the noise was coming.

Clouds were moving overhead, and a small break allowed moonlight to shine through. The trail was suddenly illuminated in a soft glow.

Shit.

Too late to move and nowhere to go. He waited.

A small child suddenly appeared, a little Vietnamese girl. She ran along the trail directly toward him, head up. She saw the killer, gun straight out and pointed at her small head. She stopped dead in her tracks.

He heard a gasp, a sharp intake of breath. The child's eyes were shining; he saw them sparkle in the moonlight. She opened her mouth, perhaps to scream, and a hand shot out of the jungle grabbing her hair, pulling her small head back. Another hand, quick, a flash of shiny metal, and then she stood there, wobbling slightly, making a gurgling sound as blood began to sputter out her throat, around her chin, running down her small chest saturating and staining her blouse dark black in the moon's pale light.

A man stepped out of the jungle. He carried an M16 rifle in one hand, a knife in the other. It was his partner in the killer squad. He stepped carefully past the bleeding child. He turned and faced the first killer. The man with the M16 smiled and nodded, knelt down and slid the bloody knife back into the sheath on his right leg and then turned and faced back down the trail, his M16 at the ready to guard their evac out of the area.

The killer held the gun steady, still pointing down the trail.

The child swayed once, then fell face first onto the trail.

This is not war, he thought; it's murder.

Without thinking, he took careful aim at the man with the M16 guarding their flank. Then he pulled the trigger.

## RECOLLECTION

*New Jersey, Present Day*

Bill watched his Uncle Frank, standing there a few feet away wearing jeans and a black, short-sleeved T-shirt. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon in early April, the sun was out, and the temperature hovered right around 60 degrees.

Jacket weather thought Bill absently, not T-shirt weather

“Why don’t you put that gun down, Uncle Frank? There’s a rack right over there. Come and sit down for a few minutes. We’ve got to wait for these guys to finish up.”

Uncle Frank stepped a little closer to where Bill sat, the old Fox double barrel shotgun hanging business end down in his left hand.

“I’m all right holding it, Billy. You know I don’t like to put my weapon down.”

“Why, you think someone is going to take that old shotgun home with him?” He said it with a smile.

Uncle Frank shook his head slightly, and then looked out at the other shooters taking their turns on the line.

“Aren’t you cold? I’ve got an extra sweatshirt in the truck.”

Uncle Frank took a small step closer to Bill. “Where I live, this is like summer. You never came up to visit us too close to either side of winter. When I left home three days ago, it was 16 degrees in the sun, and that’s no lie. Had what we call a warm spell. This, heck, this is downright balmy. I’m going to head home all tan and tell people I just came back from a tropical vacation.” He smiled his easy smile, and it made Bill feel good to see it.

Bill didn’t see his uncle often. Less and less it seemed, as they both got older. Frank was nearing 70, though he could pass for 10 years younger. He was tall, about six-one, with broad shoulders, salt and pepper hair that was still relatively thick, and arms that looked fit and strong. He had the beginnings of an old-man paunch around the belly that Bill was sure was a testament to his aunt’s hearty cooking. Well, his late aunt. Bill, now in his early 40s with a wife and two growing boys, just didn’t have the time to travel up to Maine, where his reclusive uncle seemed to have always lived with his wife.

Frank’s wife of more than 45 years had passed away several weeks earlier. No one knew she had died until Uncle Frank called Bill two days after she was put in the ground. Said he didn’t want a big thing made of it, people driving or flying up to that little town where he lived up in the wilds of Maine. He had asked Bill to let the rest of the family know that Aunt Sadie had passed, explain how things were, ask folks not to call him for a while, let him settle in. Bill had offered to drive up with his wife and the boys, stay with him for a few days, but Uncle Frank had declined. Said he needed a little space and some time alone to get used to things. Said not to worry, he was fine.

But Bill had worried.

The loud reports of the shotguns stopped abruptly. The five shooters began picking up their spent plastic shell casings and dumping them into buckets scattered along the shooting stations and then made their way back off the trap field to where Bill and his uncle waited along with three other shooters they did not know who would round out their set.

“Looks like we’re up, Uncle Frank.”

Bill slipped a box of 25 neatly stacked target loads into a small ammo basket that he had purchased at a Dick’s Sporting Goods store last year. The little basket was made to hold one box of shotgun shells and had a belt loop for securing it tight to your waist making it easy to reach and to reload. He watched with amusement as his uncle ripped open his box and began stuffing shells into the pockets of his jeans. When his box was empty, Uncle Frank’s pockets bulged to about bursting.

“You gonna be able to walk with all those shells stuffed in there like that?”

“You mind your own business, Billy Boy. It’s not the fancy gun or the pretty ammo basket knocks down those birds. It’s the man behind the trigger.” He gave a smile and a wink, and they headed to their positions on the shooting line.

They shot three rounds. Bill hit 17 of 25 on the first round, then 15, and then 19. Frank hit 13 the first round, then began feeling more comfortable with the old Fox as he got re-acquainted with it and hit 22 and then 23 in the final round.

After picking up the spent shells and dumping them into the buckets, they went back to the bench. Bill laid his Beretta semi-auto in the rack and began loading his protective shooting glasses, ammo basket and noise suppression headphones into his bag. Uncle Frank stood a little ways off and pulled out the foam plugs he had stuffed into his ears with his right hand while holding onto his old Fox with his left. He threw the plugs into the large garbage can and stood watching the men who were shooting or milling about behind the firing lines waiting their turns.

When they had finished gathering their things, they walked over to the field house. Bill went inside to pay for the six rounds of trap they had shot. There were chairs and tables on the porch of the field house, and Frank waited in one of them watching their gear. When Bill returned from inside, he found a hot cup of coffee waiting for him. His uncle was sipping from a can of Coke. Bill sat down and sipped his coffee. It felt good going down, taking away some of the chill of the day even though Bill was wearing a thick sweatshirt. Frank seemed totally unbothered by the temperature as he sat with his big hand wrapped around his frosty can of soda.

“You really started knocking them down after that first round. What were you doing, using both barrels?” Bill looked over at Frank. Frank answered without turning to look back at him, instead staring straight ahead at the men shooting.

“I should have used both barrels. My eyes, they’re not what they used to be. That gun, the old Fox, it’s nice. I bought that before you were born. It’s gotta be over 50 years old now. Used to use it when I went hunting with your father, when we were young. Haven’t shot it in years. The old guns, they made them out of higher quality metal back then. That’s why they last.”

“It’s a beautiful gun. My dad used to tell me about that gun, about when you and he went hunting and sometimes you’d load up both barrels with double ought to take down a rabbit. Said there’d be nothing left but scraps of bloody fur.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Thought it was funny then, not so much anymore.”

“You still hunt?”

“No, I lost my taste for killing things a while back. Was pretty good at it for a long time though. Always enjoyed the stalking part, the tracking, the waiting. Never really liked pulling the trigger. But when I did kill, I tried always to harvest what I could. What we didn’t eat, we gave to neighbors or donated to those less fortunate.”

“Except those rabbits, I guess,” Bill said it with a smile.

“Yeah, except maybe those rabbits.” Frank didn’t smile back.

“I thought you still went on those trips with Aunt Sadie’s side of the family. Didn’t you tell me that you went to hunting camp with them last year? Geez, I remember going with you and Dad when I was just a kid.”

“Well, that camp has changed some since you were there. We built a cabin about ten or so years ago. Put up one of those prefab log jobs. Real nice, ran electric and everything, keep a small gas generator in back so they can actually heat the place, plug in lights and a radio and such. And yeah, I still go. But I don’t hunt. I keep camp; you know, do the cooking and make sure those boys don’t drink. Hell, it’s dangerous enough traipsing around in the woods with all of those tourists during the hunting season. I know you’ve read about them getting all excited and shooting someone’s cow thinking they’re bagging a moose or something. Those stories are true. I know some people paint the word *cow* on the side of their livestock in big white letters, just to let them know. Still lose animals every year.”

“Wow, that’s funny.”

“Pathetic more like it.”

Bill noticed that even though his uncle was talking to him, his eyes were on something or someone out in one of the trap fields.

“What are you looking at? You see someone you know?”

Uncle Frank stood up, grabbed his shotgun off the rack with his left hand, and then reached over and grabbed Bill’s shotgun with his right.

“Let’s head back, Billy. I just got a chill.”

Without another word, he turned and began walking briskly toward the steps that led to the lot where Bill’s 2011 Jeep Cherokee was parked.

Bill had the rear hatch open and was loading his shotgun into its soft padded carrying case when he heard a voice that he didn’t recognize say “Hey, don’t I know you?”

Bill turned around to see an older man smiling, or perhaps sneering at him, it was hard to tell which. He wore dark, mirrored aviator sunglasses and had on a dark ball cap with no insignia on it. He was on the short side, around five-six or five-seven, had on a blue, long sleeved T-shirt with some sort of union emblem under a camouflage shooting vest. His blue jeans were old and worn, as were his scuffed black motorcycle boots.

Bill pulled his head out of the back of the Jeep and turned to face the man.

“I don’t know, sir. You don’t look familiar. My name’s Bill.” He smiled and extended his hand to the stranger, but the man ignored it.

“Not talking to you son, I’m talking to him.” The man nodded his head and Bill turned around to see his uncle standing a few steps behind him. His uncle stood erect, his right arm holding the old double barrel shotgun pointed slightly downward. His left arm hung loosely at his side, like an old-time gunslinger. The look on his face was something that Bill had never seen before; it was totally blank. Even his eyes seemed dark and lifeless, like those of a shark.

“I’ve seen you before,” said the man, stepping around Bill so that he was looking up directly into Frank’s face. “Just can’t seem to grab hold of it yet. Blast from the past, you

know what I mean? Still a little fuzzy around the edges. But it will come to me. I'm good with faces. Not good with names, but I'm damn good with faces. It will come."

The men looked at each other, not more than two feet apart, neither saying anything for a few long seconds. Bill noticed the shotgun start moving ever so slightly upward.

Finally, Frank broke the silence. "You're mistaken friend, you don't know me. I'm not from around here."

He stepped past the man and laid the old Fox next to Bill's Beretta in the back of the Jeep, then slammed the gate closed. The man continued to watch Frank, stepping close and invading his personal space, like a dog sniffing at someone, that strange smile never leaving his face.

Frank turned and looked down at the man. Then he stepped closer still; leaning down and in until they were just inches from each other, face-to-face. The other man conceded no space; they were like two bulls snorting at each other. Bill thought that one or the other might take a swing and without really thinking about it, readied himself in case he might need to step between them.

"We'll be leaving now." Frank spoke so softly that Bill almost didn't hear him. Then he said much louder, his eyes never leaving those of the other man, "Let's get going Billy, and leave this gentleman to his recollections."

Frank turned away from the man and walked to the passenger side door, opened it, and got in. Bill looked at the stranger for a second more, but the man just stared at where Frank had disappeared into the Jeep, that same strange smile on his face. Then Bill checked the tailgate to make sure that it was shut properly and walked around to the driver's side door, opened it, and got in.

"What the hell is with that guy?" he asked his uncle as he turned the key and started the engine. "I thought you two were gonna start brawling right there in the parking lot."

Frank patted his nephew on the thigh gently, looking straight ahead. "Why don't you get us out of here?"

As Bill put the transmission into reverse, the man with the mirrored sunglasses and the weird, scary smile stepped around to the passenger side window. He peered in, his face inches from the glass. Uncle Frank did nothing for a second, then pushed the button on the door's armrest, and the window lowered. He turned his head slowly and looked at the stranger but didn't say anything.

"It's starting to come to me, out of the haze of the past. I know your face. You were in the shit, man, I know you were. You were in the shit. Am I right? Am I right?"

Uncle Frank sighed, and then said, "It's all shit, partner, isn't it?" He pressed the button again, and the window rose slowly. He looked at his nephew and said, "Drive, Billy Boy, drive."

Bill backed out of the spot carefully, turned the wheel and headed out of the parking lot toward the road. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the man staring after them. As he watched, the man reached into his vest pocket and pulled out what looked to be a small pad and a pen and began writing something down. Bill continued watching, keeping one eye on the road in front and one eye on the mirror as the Jeep reached the end of the lot, and then the road. He stopped and looked both ways preparing to exit the parking lot onto the roadway, but before he did, he stole one last look in the mirror. The strange man was gone. He turned the wheel to the left, hit the gas, and they began the drive back to his house in Hackensack.

After a few minutes of driving in silence, Bill said, "You gonna tell me what that was all about back there?"

Uncle Frank looked out the window as they drove east along Route 46. The road was lined on both sides with an endless succession of strip malls.

"I'm not really sure. Didn't have a real good feeling about that one, you know? He was watching me, it seems, right from when we first got there. Guess he thinks he knows me from somewhere. But he's mistaken."

"What'd he mean when he said that you were in the shit?"

"I believe he meant the war. I can't stand it when those old guys go all Hollywood. Lots of them never even fired a shot in the war. Not every Vietnam veteran was out there in the jungle with a rifle. Leastwise, I bet most of them Hollywood types weren't."

"So, he thinks he knows you from the war?"

"Yeah, I guess." Uncle Frank turned away from the side window and looked straight ahead.

"Does he?"

"Does he what?" Now Frank turned and looked at his nephew.

"Does he know you from the war?"

Frank shook his head and looked down at his lap. "Hell, I don't know. I served two tours. Ran across a lot of people. I sure as hell don't remember him. I didn't like him much, though. Something about him made me real uneasy. It was something he gave off, an aura, like bad body odor. That was why I wanted to get out of there. He was trouble for sure."

"Was he really a Vietnam veteran? I mean, could you tell? Maybe he was just some guy acting out. He seemed pretty strange to me. Actually, I thought he seemed crazy. I mean like insane crazy. He had that weird smile, not happy at all, more menacing than anything, like a psycho smile, you know? And he kept getting in your face. I thought you were going to hit him, I really did."

"Well, I come pretty close to taking a swing, that's no lie. Seems a bit irrational now that I think about it from a distance. Still, you get some crazies. It's best to leave them be and get on your way. Guy like that hanging out at a gun range, and you ask me why I never put down my weapon. But to answer your question, I'd say probably yes. Was about the right age anyway."

"Were you in the, uh, field, Uncle Frank? In Vietnam I mean."

"You mean was I in the shit?" Both men smiled.

"Well, I was for a while. I guess you know I don't like to talk about it much. I know you and your brothers, and your cousins too, all heard stories about me, mostly speculation about what I did in the war. Figure I'm some kind of Rambo or secret agent or some such nonsense. But I was just a grunt, a regular soldier. Did a stint in intelligence, so I guess that's where all those stories and speculation come from? But it was mostly reading maps, trying to guess what the enemy was up to and where they'd be heading next."

"But you did two tours. My dad told me you won some medals. Said you were wounded in action. More than once. That true?"

Frank turned his gaze back out the passenger-side window.

"If you don't want to talk about it Uncle Frank, I understand. It's none of my business. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I was just curious, you know? That's all."

“Yeah, I know, Bill. It’s just that it was a long time ago. I was a young man then, a boy really. I’ve got scars, but it’s not the ones on my body that pain me the most. Every generation is the same, I guess. My dad fought in World War II. I heard a hundred stories from him when I was growing up, about him and his buddies in boot camp and being on leave and traveling in the troop ships and about the food and the girls and the beer. Hell, how many times you hear your Grandpa tell those stories? But you never once heard him tell a war story, you know, like what you’re asking around right now. My dad, he wasn’t a drinking man, but one time when I was about nineteen or so, him and me started in on a bottle of scotch. Just that once I saw him drunk, and I mean shit-faced drunk. He told me some stories that night, not those fun stories about him in his tailored uniform chasing English ladies around. He told me about actually pissing his pants in fear lying in the mud and crying for his mommy like a child, about the sound that them old Panzer tanks made as they rumbled across a field that was different and more frightening than anything he’d ever heard before or since, said he often heard those Panzers in the middle of the night even there in bed with your grandmother and could actually feel the bed shaking. He told me about seeing his buddy, a guy from New Milford name of Al Kaspazack - Geez, I can’t believe I still remember that poor soul’s name - vaporized after taking a direct hit from a German 88. Said he saw him standing there one second, an instant later there was nothing left but two charred combat boots, each with a small, bloody stump sticking out of it.”

“Jesus!” Bill was taken aback by the image. He knew that people died in war, but hearing this story about what his grandfather, the gentle, loving old man that he remembered from his youth, had gone through utterly shocked him.

“I saw your grandfather cry that night as he remembered those stories. I don’t think it was so much that he couldn’t hold his liquor, though that was certainly part of it. I think it was that those stories were suppressed for so long that all it took was a little booze to loosen his inhibitions enough to let all those memories and emotions come pouring out. And I mean, that’s what happened. It was like he couldn’t stop talking, one terrible memory after another. I was holding him in my arms, my own father, like he was a little baby. At the time, I’d never seen anything like it, a grown man crying like that. I’ve seen a lot more of it since then, but at the time I didn’t know what to do. So, I made him stop after a while, dragged him off to bed. I stayed with him, watched him cry himself out and fall asleep. We never spoke about that night again. I never asked him to tell me another story about his time in the service. Not even about the girls in England. And he never asked me anything either after I came home. Just held me tight like I did him.”

“Geez, Uncle Frank, I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s okay, Billy. Truth is, I’ve seen some things and done some things I don’t care to remember. Drank another bottle of scotch one night with your Aunt Sadie. That was shortly after I got back the second time. Wish I’d stayed away from it that night. I guess I blacked out because I don’t remember much, just bits and pieces. But the little I do remember, I wish to God I had kept to myself. I asked her about it the next day, sort of casual, hoping I was mistaken, but she wouldn’t say anything. So, I asked again the day after that. She wouldn’t talk about it. We never spoke of it again. It’s sort of like what happened between my dad and me. But after that night, for a few weeks at least, I could feel that something had come between us, something that wasn’t there before. It was like she was afraid of me somehow, though I swear I never gave her ’cause to be. She never said

so, you understand, but I could sense it. Believe me, I stayed away from the drink after that. Gave her some space, too.”

“I guess she eventually got over it, whatever it was you told her.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d put it that way. She was young in age at that time, your Aunt Sadie, but she was wise beyond her years. I always believed she could see right inside my heart. I think she understood.”

“Understood what?”

Uncle Frank didn’t answer. He just turned away from Bill and stared out the window. After a minute or so he said so softly that Bill could hardly hear, “Lord, I miss that woman.”

Neither Bill nor Frank said anything more for the rest of the drive home.