

HARD BOOT

A Novel by James McGarrah

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Chapter One

This Thursday morning there was the wind. There was always the wind before the sun in August, especially in the year 1972. For some unknown reason, the early summer thunderstorms had outlived their life expectancy and rudely revved up the pre-dawn breezes of the Midwestern dog days, spreading the high humidity and heat over the race track like a gray wool blanket. Max Murphy loved the way the current of air lifted him out of the saddle. The gentle pressure molded his face into a smile that even the strain on his arms and legs could not diminish. The great bay gelding he rode and Max were both parts of the same cosmic machine on separate planes of being.

They pulled together in different directions. One leaned heavily into the snaffle bit. The other stood straight in the irons, tugging upward evenly on both reins. Without the set of rings and the leather yoke around his massive chest to keep his head bowed and give Max leverage, the five year old gelding would have run off and kept running until his four legs and Max's arms turned to jelly. It would have been a good trip for a couple of miles though, horse and man together flowing free, barely touching the clay and sand surface of Ellis Park race track. Max had come to realize that nothing in life is more sacred than the buzz of adrenaline in your blood and a warm wind in your face. The horse already knew that. It was part of what made him a great runner. Unfortunately, both were professionals with a job to do, so they circled along the outside rail of the racetrack like a hobbyhorse and a pretend cowboy.

“Easy Storm. We’re almost to the gap big boy.” The gelding tossed his head side to side in an effort to break the rider’s strong grip on the reins. It was more of a game than anything else. Max eased Storm Strike down to a jog and began to post up and down

like a piston, barely touching his seat on the exercise saddle each time the gelding threw out a leg and pegged the soft track. After a furlong, the jog slowed to a walk and Max sat down in the saddle, kicking his legs out of the stirrups. When the reins went slack, Max crossed them into his left palm, untied the knot in them with his right, then reached up and scratched Storm behind his ears. The gelding pinned his ears back, as if irritated with the attention. “Good job Stormy. These fucking fleabags at this track won’t see anything but your ass on Saturday.”

As they turned off of the main track and walked through the gap in the rail that opened onto a path through the barn area, a lithe young woman astride an Appaloosa pony moved past them. She had a sullen thoroughbred stallion beside her and attached to her by means of a leather lead shank.

“Hey Sherry, taking old Native out for a spin,” Max said.

“Yeah. The nasty old son-of-a-bitch can’t take any weight on his back with that chip in his knee and if I don’t get him some exercise he’ll tear his stall to pieces. How’s the big horse going?”

“Great.” Max answered the back of her head as she jogged through the gap, turned right, and kicked her pony in the flanks. The pony and the thoroughbred took off side by side, but within a few strides, the thoroughbred was kicking and bucking and nipping at Sherry’s right leg. She shook the lead shank and asked the pony for more speed at the same time. “Now there’s a woman Stormy boy. I wish I had the guts to ask her out. Of course, that doesn’t mean much to you without any cojones, right buddy.” The gelding pranced down the slight slope that led away from the track and toward the barn area. Damn this old bastard feels good, thought Max, hoping the racehorse would

run the way he felt on Saturday.

Sitting on Storm Strike's back, Max smelled the straw, the liniment, the bad coffee, the sweat, the leather, and the manure, all mingled in the air. It was a special morning odor, full of anticipation. It was the tang of life and like many other smells on the racetrack, it reminded him of his father and how he, the son, first came to love horse racing. He remembered his dad's thick hand holding a quarter just out of reach, flicking it in the air with a thumb and forefinger. The silver shimmered in a blue sky and seemed to bruise a cloud. Max recalled waiting, almost forever, for the sun to spit it back.

"Take the money and buy us a racing program. I'm going to get a ticket on the daily double. I'm going to buy you one too."

"I haven't picked my horses, dad."

"That's okay. We'll get a four and an eight. You were born in '48."

Those two horses, the four and the eight, ran just like his dad had predicted, one right after the other. Of course, six other horses crossed the wire before them. Max's dad was a great handicapper. He was a great handicapper, but a terrible gambler. No one read the statistics in the Daily Racing Form better than he did. Not only that, he could watch the horses prance into the paddock before each race and understand their thoughts.

"See the white foam around the saddle girth on that one."

"Yeah, it looks like whipped cream."

"Sweat. That's sweat. The old nag is washing out. I remember the last time he ran. He was cool as a cucumber. Something's bothering him today."

"What? What's bothering him?"

“It doesn’t matter. Something. Anything. He won’t run good today. But look at that gray horse pushing his groom around. He’s up on the bit and he’ll run like a bandit.”

His father’s analytical skills were correct more often than not. Many of the horses Max’s dad believed in did run very well, but not with his money on them. He only bet to win, never place, never show. The idea that the best horse might encounter uncontrollable circumstances was a completely foreign one. He always said place bets were for sissies and, without questioning his own logic, that grand old man would rip apart the useless ticket on the way to the betting window to buy another. That particular day when Max first began to love the sport, he had watched his dad pick eight horses in eight races that all ran second. It was a remarkable feat. Riding home from the track after not cashing a single one of the eight tickets, which were to win, all he said was, “I need to get your mom a present, so she won’t get mad and fix salmon patties for supper.” Max and his dad both hated salmon.

His father was dead and buried ten years. He died in 1962 when Max was fourteen years old. But right now in Max’s mind as he rode the gelding toward the barn, John Murphy held his son by the hand. The crowd was rising to its feet, screaming for one thousand pound animal to stick its nose in front of another at some predetermined point on a clay track. The ground seemed to vibrate, shaken by the drum of forty hooves. For an instant the air was electric, swirling and crackling, as if a jockey’s whip had sliced it in half. There was Max’s father scooping him off the ground, placing him gently on his shoulders, and wrapping his forearms around his legs to hold him steady. There was Max screaming for the winner.

Then the illusion shattered like a windowpane struck by the morning newspaper. It was that sudden and loud. Max and Storm had arrived at the barn area in the midst of morning chaos. Buckets clattered. Water hoses hissed. Someone in the barn across from theirs played the radio loudly and Mick Jagger whined through the thick air – *But it's aaaahhhh right, matter a fact it's a gas. It's aaaahhhh right, Jumpin' Jack Flash it's a gas gas gas.* Other riders and other horses shuffled in and out of shedrows all around him. Grooms and hotwalkers danced out of the shadows carrying leather lead shanks, sponges, and soap in their arms, and the hope that this day would bring them a little closer to one big score on their sweating faces. His dad always said that no man would ever commit suicide with an untried horse in his stable.

“Murphy. Murphy, wake the fuck up. You almost ran that horse over a wheelbarrow.” Dan Wilson spoke from beside the wash buckets.

“Sorry, boss. Just thinking about the race Saturday.”

“Well, watch where you're going so we don't cripple him beforehand. How'd he travel? I was in the Secretary's office and I missed the workout.”

“Like a Cadillac.”

“Good, take him to Monk and Victor and get him a bath. You cool him out. I don't want one of those hardboots stumbling around the barn trying to hold him on the ground.”

Dan Wilson, Max's boss, was a hardboot himself, or at least he had been one before Storm Strike came along and made him a fairly wealthy horse trainer. In Max's mind, the word hardboot wore like a badge of honor. It was something he would always want to be and never could be. Hardboots were men with single names like Monk, Hoss,

Red, and Victor that made the racetrack a place of mystery. Because of them, the backside of every track took on its own special atmosphere. No one knew where they came from, or how long they had worked the horses. They were always there, traveling from one race meet to the next – Churchill Downs, Keeneland, Sportsman, Hawthorne, Fairgrounds, Oaklawn Park, and here at Ellis Park in the summer – always dodging the cold weather by a few weeks and the responsibilities of life by a few miles.

Horseracing was their birthright. Their mothers were the nameless old women who cooked breakfast and made coffee at the track kitchens. Men like Dan, who paid them enough money daily to stay drunk after they mucked the stalls and cooled out the thoroughbreds from the morning gallops, became their fathers. Their brothers and sisters were those same thoroughbreds. They shifted from track to track in the horse vans. They slept on cots or feed sacks in tackrooms at the end of the barns in case one of the horses should colic, or get casted against the stall wall at night, and they wept when one of their family chipped a bone or bowed a tendon. Hardboots had no unions and, except for the training stable where they worked, no relatives to speak of. They had a simple code of conduct – don't steal, don't lie, pay what you owe, and never mistreat a racehorse.

Max could never be one of them because he came to the track to escape the confusion and anger that permeated, in one form or another, the society of America outside the fenced off enclosure of the backside barn area. He loved the isolation. Here there were no burning draft cards or flags, no civil rights marches, no college sit-ins, no generation gaps, no bell-bottomed jeans, no veterans in wheel chairs, and the drug of choice was still alcohol. He loved the racetrack, but he wasn't born to it like the hardboots.

The backside was full of young men and women like Max, thrill seekers, escapees, lost and vacant-eyed runaways, looking for any life that was different from the one they had. Max and everyone like him lacked purity of purpose and simplicity of thought. Because he considered this a lot and understood it, Max both envied and respected the hardboots like he might have priests raised in a monastery to fulfill a special calling without question.

“Where you going boy. Where you going, goddamnit. Goddamnit where you going?” A tiny man that resembled a parrot scratched his thin, crooked nose with his right hand and grabbed the reins with his left. Max jumped from the saddle, unbuckled the girth, and then slipped the bridle over Storm’s ears. In one fluid motion, as if he and animal were the same being, the little parrot man slipped a halter over the horse’s ears and nose to replace the bridle. Running the eighteen-inch brass chain at the end of a leather lead shank through the openings in the halter and across the leather noseband, the man recaptured the beast without the beast ever knowing it was loose. Max laughed as he watched the bird-like movements.

“Easy there, Victor. I’m just putting old Storm in your lap, so you don’t have to chase him.”

“Well watch out. Watch out I say. Run an old man down with a big fucking horse and see if you don’t get cursed by God. By God I tell you.”

“Where’s Monk. Monk’s supposed to be washing this horse.”

“Monk, fuck Monk. He’s drunk and I’m the man with the plan, the man that knows how to keep the big horse going right, the man that keeps the finish line in sight.”

“You’re drunk too.”

“It’s the middle of the morning boy. Who the hell’s left sober in the middle of the morning.”

“Just give the horse a bath in silence, will you?”

The horse shook his great head and snorted, squirming impatiently. Victor rattled the halter and chain across Storm’s nose and the squirming stopped. Max laid the saddle and bridle on the waist-high concrete wall that surrounded the barn and grabbed the shank out of Victor’s hand. Two buckets, one with soap and the other with clear warm water, stood on the ground beside the horse. Victor grabbed a sponge from the soap bucket and ran it down Storm Strike’s long neck. Max held the horse steady with the lead shank.

“Let me ask you something boy,” said Victor as he wet the sponge in the bucket again.

“What?”

“Ain’t you been to college?”

“For a few months,” Max answered, shifting the shank to his left hand and reaching for a cigarette with the other. He didn’t much care about sharing his past with Victor and he listened cautiously for what was coming.

“Then answer me this. How can a woman be *pretty* ugly? ‘Cause I know a woman that’s pretty ugly.”

As Victor spoke and washed the horse, Max watched the hand-rolled cigarette between his beak-like lips bounce up and down like a fishing bobber on a windy lake. He had never seen the man without a smoke in his mouth, or rolling one from a tin of Velvet tobacco. Victor’s face was tanned and wrinkled like the leather lead shank in Max’s hand.

The only thing the exercise rider knew for sure about this old hardboot came from watching him drink and work and take care of Storm Strike. Every movement the old man made around the horse was calculated to keep the horse relaxed and comfortable, even though the man twitched nervously himself from the inside out.

Victor couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet, yet during the course of a morning's work, he and Monk, the other stable hand, drank a case of beer, pulling cans one after another from an ice-filled wash tub. Each seemed to know when the other had finished twelve cans. After splitting that case, Monk and Victor finished their duties and bought another for the afternoon races. They sat in the bleachers on the backside every afternoon and drank it while watching the races. Victor always came back to the barn after the eighth race, got the evening feed ready for Dan to put in, then retired to the tack room at the end of the barn where he slept on an old Army cot. No one ever saw him again until 5:30 the next morning, wide-awake, moving from stall to stall, feeding each horse a cup of oats. When Max arrived at 6:00 AM to tack and gallop the thoroughbreds, Victor began cleaning stalls with Monk. What all this told Max was that Victor was as tough as a piece of gristle and had no existence outside the fenced stabling area of a racetrack. Max didn't feel sorry for him because, his whole world was a simple exercise of habit without thought. Thinking could be painful.

“Pretty is a word that can be a noun or an adjective.”

“What's that mean?”

“It means it's okay for something to be pretty ugly.”

“Fucking English don't make sense.”

Victor had finished washing and rinsing Storm Strike. He pulled an aluminum

scraper from the rinse bucket and began squeezing excess water from the horse's dark bay colored coat. Storm shivered as the metal tickled his back.

“Okay, here's what's really bothering me. Can a preacher save whores?”

“Well Victor, I guess a preacher can save them from something.”

“Okay, okay. How come that crazy-assed woman preacher that yells about saving whores all the time in the track kitchen called me a prick this morning?”

“I have no idea what one thing has to do with the other, you little shit.”

“I asked her to save me two for Friday night.”

Victor gathered up buckets and sponges and backed away from Max laughing. Max shook his head slowly and led the big horse into the walking ring to cool out. He liked this process. All he had to do was hold on to the horse, walk around the barn, and daydream, stopping every lap or so by Storm's water bucket while the horse sipped a mixture of cool water and electrolytes.

The sun came out hot from behind the gray clouds. Max and the horse enjoyed the shade of the barn roof. The breeze continued swirling through the open sides of the wooden stable and loose straw danced around tack boxes and stacked hay bales. Small fans, wired up in the individual stalls to keep the horses cool, hummed. Geldings and fillies hung their heads over nylon stall webbings and pulled mouthfuls of light green timothy hay from nylon racks with crackling and crunching sounds.

Storm paraded around on his toes. He was king of this racing stable and he knew it. Occasionally, when passing one of the stalls that housed the two stud horses in Dan's care, Max would have to duck. They ran at the webbing, thrust their chests against it, and extended long necks into the walking ring, nipping playfully at Max. He stayed alert

because a playful bite from a thoroughbred stud could remove a piece of flesh the size of an orange.

Victor had found Monk. The two old boys were working down the line of stalls on the west side of the barn. Each had a tray filled with brushes, currycombs, rags, hoof picks, and various liniments and leg rubs and they moved from stall to stall. When they left a stall, the horse in it was sleek and clean, standing in bright white flannel leg wraps. Dan sat in the tack room at the end of the barn, drinking coffee and entering training notes in his logbook. To Max, this was the one time of the day when all was right with the world.

Chapter Two

Sherry felt like crying. She could barely endure sitting beneath Native Son anymore and rubbing his left knee, although she did it everyday. He had been a great runner once, before small pieces of bone began splintering off the carpal joints in his knee. Doc Tandini called them “floating chips” because they shifted around in the knee and irritated everything in it. On most mornings she rubbed the knee with Bigel Oil, massaging the light green mentholated liquid deep into the painful area, then covering it with a thick pad and carefully tying a spider bandage over it to hold the pad in place.

Wrapping a spider bandage was an art. Her dad had shown her how to braid each of the eight strands together and knot them all so no circulation was cut off to the knee and the joint remained flexible. This morning her routine was different. She rubbed out the knee with alcohol and left it unwrapped. Since her dad had decided to run Native Son in the Governor’s Handicap on Saturday, the knee needed to be tapped. Sherry understood why they were going to run the horse against Storm Strike, but she didn’t like the idea. She didn’t like at all. Max had let her know earlier on the track that Storm was fit and would be a tough horse to beat. When people in the race business needed money, they often gambled and ran a crippled horse. Sherry knew that and she hated it. Sherry and her dad certainly needed money, but Native was a member of the family. If he broke down chasing Storm Strike, she would lose more than money. She would lose a friend.

Grabbing the currycomb from her tray, she stood and began swirling it around the six-year-old stallion’s neck. He tossed his head and snorted playfully. “You like that don’t you old man,” she said, running the comb down his back and across the whirl bone. Native bucked once and kicked his left rear leg straight back. “Watch it boy. You kick me

and there'll be no one to feed you.”

She worked silently and efficiently, but with patience. Sweating through her white tee shirt, she brushed his tail and mane, and then shined his red coat with a soft rag as if polishing a Rolls Royce. When she finished her nipples were hard. Anything that gives you pleasure ends up being about sex she thought. Dropping the rag into the tray, she grabbed a hoof pick with her right hand, tapped the back of the horse's left front leg with her other hand, and held it off the ground. “Good boy. You're my good big boy.” She always encouraged him that way, even though Native Son gave her no trouble. After being together for four years, the horse and the girl seemed to know each other's thoughts before they occurred. Sherry had spent hours in the stall with Native getting to this point in the relationship and she liked it. The older trainers on the track, the ones that traveled the circuit before women were commonplace in the barn area, joked that stallions responded to the smell of a woman with obedience, like men hoping to get a little if they were well behaved. She thought any man or beast that responded to the way a woman smelled with a hard on after that woman had been rolling around in horse manure and sweat all morning was probably fairly stupid or horny or both.

With the hoof pick, she carefully scraped away all the dirt from the bottom of his hoof, prying some gravel from between the frog and the sole. Sherry repeated the action with the other three legs. When finished, she dropped down on all fours, opened a can of Corona ointment and began rubbing it into each hoof at the hairline. The ointment was made for cow's teats, but the lanolin base kept the new hoof from drying out as it grew downward from the end of the pastern bone.

“What are you doing girl?”

Startled, she jumped and spooked Native. The horse threw his head up and scooted backward in his stall, almost stepping on her hand. Sherry had been so focused on the ritual of grooming that Doc Tandini's arrival went unnoticed.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to spook the old man. Where's your father?"

"He's already gone to the jock's room. He's riding two horses for David Varner's stable today." She pulled the stallion back to the front of the stall and let Doc rub his nose. Native settled down as soon as he recognized the veterinarian's touch. "They're both nags, but even if they don't get on the board, Dad makes jock mount. We need the money."

"You're dad needs to quit drinking and gambling, then you'd have some money."

"He hasn't done too well with that since mom took off for Florida with that silly ass pari-mutuel clerk a couple of years ago."

"I know, but your dad's no spring chicken anymore. He's got trouble keeping his weight down and those old broken bones have got to be sore in the mornings. And I speak from personal experience regarding broken bones," he said. Sherry watched him grab his leg and wince. It was probably an unconscious reaction to his own words, but she noted it for future reference anyway.

"Yeah, but he's still a pretty good guy."

"Yes, he is. You holding Native for me while I tap his knee?" Doc Tandini handed Sherry the small wooden club with a looped rope on the end called a twitch.

"Put the twitch on him while I get a syringe ready." Doc stepped out of the stall to get the equipment from his bag. Sherry noticed him limp slightly and wondered if his leg might be getting worse. When she was a small child, she remembered him as a fearless

rider, a man that would get on any horse for any reason. Then one night at Fairmont Park in St. Louis, he had ridden a winner across the finish line and the photographer snapped the picture. But the horse was racing at night for the first time. The lights cast unfamiliar shadows in unusual places. When the flash on the camera popped, the horse propped. It just dug its heels into the track and lowered its head. Doc went flying over the horse's head and into the track surface. The movement was so sudden he didn't have a chance. The first two riders following him couldn't steer their horses away in time and ran over Doc like he was a sack of dirty laundry.

Her father, Manny, and Doc were good friends. Manny gripped her hand tight and hurried out onto the track with her as the ambulance attendants loaded up the rider's crumpled body. Doc was unconscious and she remembered thinking how happy she was about that because of all the blood and the bright white bone sticking out of his left leg. At least he couldn't feel it or see it himself. At the hospital, her father said they put a long metal rod in Doc's leg to hold it on.

The man never rode again, but Sherry liked him because he refused to give up horses. He was a true hardboot. After the leg healed enough, he went back to college on crutches and learned to be a vet, a damn good one she thought. When she saw him limping around on his bad days, as he called them, she felt a twinge of sadness. Fifteen years had passed since the spill that night. Doc drank way too much and his yellow skin constantly stretched across his square face tight with pain. She didn't like to see anything hurting.

Looking at the twitch in her hand, she said, "I wish we didn't need these things. I've used them a thousand times and I know they don't really cause as much discomfort

as they seem to, but I still don't like them."

"That's a good thought. On the other hand, I don't want to get stomped by this thousand pounds of testosterone when I shove a needle in him. Get that twitch on girl and make old Native think about his nose instead of his knee. I've got fifteen more horses to medicate before post time."

"Sorry, just daydreaming."

"Maybe you need to find you a boyfriend among these young bucks walking around here."

"Who says I don't have one already?" Sherry laughed and grabbed the end of Native's nose. She slipped the loop over the flesh and twisted the wooden handle. The rope tightened and the horse froze. Sherry was a good hand with horses. Even though her thin frame seemed more like it belonged to a fashion model than a racetrack hardboot, she was wiry and tough and the grace with which she moved was more animal than human. Sherry admitted those things about herself to herself and felt the confidence glowing in her freckled face, like a blush. She didn't remember a time in her life when there were no horses. Even as a young girl, she was at the track before and after school every day. Her father and mother always stayed in Lexington, Kentucky at the Training Center through every school year so Sherry could finish her education in the same place.

She respected her dad for that. Manny Devereoux might have been a famous rider, if he had been willing to travel the racing circuit and ignore his family. God knows Cajuns could ride a horse. That's one of the reasons she hated her mother. Manny sacrificed his career to keep his family together and living a semi-normal life, then lost his wife to a man that was willing to travel.

“Got his attention?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Doc opened a package containing a disposable 18-gauge needle and plastic 10 cc. syringe. He twisted the needle off the syringe, rubbed the horse’s knee with a cotton swab of alcohol, and thrust the needle into a soft, swollen area in the middle of the joint. As thick yellow fluid began to drip from the plastic tip, Sherry remembered idyllic pictures in a National Geographic of old men who lived in Vermont tapping trees for maple syrup. She’d never been to Vermont, but thought that a summer full of mountains and cool wind might not be a bad thing for an old horse or a young woman. When Doc squeezed the flesh across the knee to milk the swollen area and the drops turned pink, the real world crowded the pretty pictured one out of her mind.

“That’s blood.”

“Yep. I’m starting to get some blood out of the bursa sac, but I’m not surprised.”

“I work on his knee every day. I’m surprised.”

“Work all you want. He’s got so many chips in there that the joint’s irritated all the time. It doesn’t matter what you do, the horse needs to be retired. He’s won enough money that he could stand stud at a small farm around here.”

As Doc spoke, he reached in his bag and extracted a vial of Dexemethazone. Taking the syringe from his pocket and the needle from Native’s knee, he rejoined them and drew the white corticosteroid from the vial. Sherry winced as he prepared to inject the horse.

“Shit, I hate this.”

“You’re the trainer of record, girl. I’m doing this on your authority.”

“We both know that the only reason I’ve got a trainer’s license is because dad can’t hold a trainer and a jockey’s license at the same time. He owns this horse and he calls the shots. We can’t make it without a little purse money from time to time. The money I get for pony work barely pays rent.”

Sherry knew Doc understood this was true and would inject the knee with the steroid because it was the way things had to be, regardless of his personal opinion. The game of racing, which had always had a business aspect, was becoming only the business of racing, even for the small operators who began racing for the sport. Ellis Park had existed on Highway 41 between Evansville, Indiana and Henderson, Kentucky for almost seven decades by the sweat and sacrifice of men who raced horses because they loved the competition and the adrenaline. These men were hardboots like her father, Manny Deveroux, who knew no other way of life, who wanted no other way of life. They were dinosaurs being driven to extinction by corporate sponsored stables and trainers in business suits that came from both coasts to capture the rising purses in Kentucky.

Doc Tandini was a sentimental veterinarian who would always do everything in his power to aid the hardboots in their struggle for survival. How many times had Sherry heard him say over a shot of scotch and a cup of coffee that when any community sacrificed its values and traditions to attract wealth, that community ran the risk of losing its identity, along with the people in it. She thought he was a very smart man and a good one, but she hoped with all her heart that he might be wrong about this one thing. She couldn’t imagine working for a big corporation that treated horses like machines.

The white liquid ran through the syringe and into the knee at several injection sites as Doc moved the needle to one swollen pocket of synovial fluid after another.

Native Son began to stomp like his hoof was on fire with each new needle prick.

“Tighten the twitch. The medicine burns.”

“Sorry.” Sherry cranked the wooden handle half a turn. The looped rope around the horse’s nose and upper lip constricted the flesh enough that Native Son paid attention to the numbness in his face rather than the irritation in his knee.

“Okay, I’m finished. Do him up in alcohol and walk him into the race. No training on the track. Give it time to work. By Saturday the swelling will be gone and so will the pain. That doesn’t mean he’ll come back good from the race. I’ll be on the backside Saturday if you need me.”

“Thanks Doc.”

“Don’t thank me. You’re going to need wings to beat Dan Wilson’s horse.”

“Yeah I know. I saw Max galloping him this morning. Storm Strike looked like a bear with a pony tail.”

“Now Max, there’s a guy that’s pretty good looking and about your age. Hell of an exercise rider too.”

“Stop trying to match me up Doc. I’m not a mare on your breeding farm you old goat. Max looks good, but he’s shorter than me.”

Doc and Sherry both smiled. He threw his equipment in the back of his Cadillac and waved goodbye. She sat down under Native and began putting on the knee spider. When the work was done, Sherry pulled the horse’s halter over his head and hung it on the stall door. Raking the dirt in front of his stall, she felt hungry and alone. Maybe hungry and alone was all the same feeling rising in the pit of her stomach as if she had just driven fast over a hill on a country road.

Chapter Three

Storm Strike cooled out fine. Max put him in his stall and threw a cup of oats in the plastic feed tub snapped to the wall. He checked the water bucket, topped it off, and for good measure, added a half-cup of sweet feed to the tub. "You earned it this morning boy." The horse rammed his head into the feed tub and came up with a huge mouth full of grain. Max laughed loudly. "I guess it's time for me to eat too, huh."

He walked to the end of the long barn and climbed in his '67 Dodge pick-up truck. Driving slowly down the backside of the racetrack past rows of barns like the one he'd just left, Max watched the grooms raking shedrows, cleaning tack, feeding horses, or sitting outside and smoking. There was no longer the morning chaos. Everyone and everything had settled into purpose and identity. He had those things once. Playing baseball in high school gave him those things. When he swung a good old Louisville slugger and made solid contact with some pitcher's best fastball the electricity that ran through the bat ran through his body as well. He saw the world for what it was, a Corvette Sting Ray with a turbo-charged engine, and on most days, felt like he was driving it. But that was six years ago. A man can go through a lot of changes in six years and Max's understanding of the simple brightness of life had grown dimmer during that time. His emotions had grown numb and his mind, cluttered with half-thoughts, partial memories, the refuse of survival. What had once been easily definable on a sunlit ball diamond now existed only as shadow.

He leaned across the seat, keeping his left hand on the steering wheel, and opened the glove box. There was a pack of Camels in there and he wanted one. At the precise moment the glove box lid came unlatched, the truck hit a hole in the cinder-covered road.

Cigarettes fell out along with an old leather ball glove. “Shit, the ballgame. I forgot.” He had promised the track chaplain that he would play in the annual charity softball game. Every year the jockeys played the backside workers to raise money for the Horseman’s Benevolent and Protective Association.

Max guided the truck over to the grass and stopped. Picking the glove up off the floor, he slid it onto his left hand and pounded his right hand into the well-worn palm. Something came to Max as he smelled the old leather and neatsfoot oil and stared at the frayed stitching on the glove. It wasn’t really an epiphany like Stephan Dedalus had in the book he had just finished reading by James Joyce; it was more like he had been given a pair of eyeglasses and his dimmed sight had been slightly corrected.

He played baseball fairly well all through high school and in his senior year was elected captain of the team. In 1966, Southern Indiana was ruled by the notion that good baseball players were gifts from God. Teams, particularly high school teams, were the measuring rods by which each small community was pronounced worthy or unworthy on a cultural scale that far surpassed the boundaries of a ball diamond. Max never questioned those standards while he lived by them. Teenaged boys became heroes with mythical qualities. Teenaged girls expressed their adoration eloquently in the backseats of family sedans. He enjoyed the worship.

Even though his father had died four years before his senior year, Max had no understanding of death, its relation to life, or wars, or betrayal, or anything else that might complicate the simple pleasure of playing baseball. In his mind, different forces he didn’t understand bred. Their offspring was a feeling of invincibility and immortality. He

was totally and clearly alive. Every fiber of his being buzzed with some inexplicable magic current.

In May of 1966, Max received a baseball scholarship to a small college not far from his home and fell deeply in love at the same time. She was the first girl he ever went all the way with, a cheerleader named Rachel with black hair and small, firm breasts. They dated for almost six months before she let him have it at the Drive –In movie during the new James Bond picture. The vinyl interior of his '57 Chevy Belair squeaked as their sweaty skin slid over the back seat. He thought the sound was the most wonderful he'd ever heard, except when the metal speaker hanging on his car window crackled – *OOHHH JAMES* – in mid-orgasm and frightened him.

After Labor Day of that same year, he packed his glove, hugged his mother, made love to Rachel one last time on a gravel road beyond Severn's Bridge, and went away to college. Max felt so good about himself that, in his mind, his father hadn't even died. He had just run second.

His college career lasted through half a dozen keg parties, two panty raids on the same sorority house, and the first semester's grade report. He never threw a baseball before being thrown out. It was early January of 1967. He was eighteen years old and becoming aware that when life pitches you a curve, it's tougher to hit than a small round ball. The smell of salmon patties and breadcrumbs filled the kitchen like always when his father had gambled or drank too much. Since all Murphy males hated salmon patties and Max was the latest transgressing Murphy at the dinner table, he prepared himself for his punishment. His mother leaned away from the stove.

“Now what?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you going to do now? In this day and age a college education is the most important thing a man can have. You had the chance to get one free.” She rolled an extra salmon patty in breadcrumbs. And threw it on the cast iron griddle. “I know you’re hungry, so I’m fixing you two. Now, what are you going to do?”

“Pop did pretty good without going to college.” Max looked around at the expensive appliances at the well-stocked bar in the kitchen.

“He worked two jobs so you kids wouldn’t have to and it killed him. Thank God he had a lot of insurance. Your brother just got a promotion at State Farm and your sister graduates this year from Purdue. I think they got his work ethic and you got his Irish temperament.”

Janice Murphy spoke with her back to him, but he could tell from the way her voice cracked that she was crying. It made him feel guilty. He would pretend to love salmon. Watching her small hands reach for a Kleenex, he noticed how curled and knotted her fingers had become and how swollen her red knuckles looked since his last trip home.

“Arthritis getting worse?”

“It’s just old age. I’m turning into my mother.”

“I’ll find a job. Maybe this summer I can make a little extra cash playing semi-pro ball with that new team in Evansville.”

“Where’s the future in that. Ten years from now you’ll have a pot belly, a bad knee, and be working at Whirlpool like every other ex-ballplayer in town. No decent woman will want you. Eat your salmon like a good boy.”

She may have been right, but, at eighteen, Max had no idea why any man would want a decent woman. He ate lunch as if it were penance ordered by Father Rousch after a rousing confession, while his mother watched *Queen for a Day* in the living room on the new color TV. Kissing his mother goodbye, Max drove to Rachel's house. Rachel lived on a quiet street with her parents, two younger brothers, and one obnoxious poodle, which hated Max almost as much as Rachel's father did. Before Max had left for college, he and Rachel spent months constantly connected by hand, mouth, or various other body parts. After they made love that first time, he knew he was in love, although the feeling seemed closely related to the smell of vanilla in her hair and the brush of her hand across his bare leg.

When he had left for college in September, Rachel wore his class ring wrapped in angora, and promised to be faithful for at least as long as it took him to become a rich and famous ballplayer. He believed her. She took a job in the hospital medical records department and wrote great letters every day for two months. After that, the letters got fewer and the tone of them more distant. By Christmas the letters stopped coming. He called and called. She was never home or too busy to talk very long.

January was always cold in Southern Indiana, not cold in a normal winter way, but in a dead way. White snow rarely graced the rooftops. No children in mufflers and mittens pulled sleds through the streets. Cold bloomed from the color gray, as if it were a flower. The sun rose gray and set the same way. The air was so damp and the wind so strong, it felt as if you were walking through an oilcloth hung from the sky. Turning left on Hart Street, Max eased the car against the curb that faced Rachel's front door. As he stepped from his car, Max felt the gray winter. A black cat ran from behind the hedges,

stopped, and with one gaze, sucked the soul from his chest.

-Horsemen get your horses ready for the first race. Here are the late scratches... -

The loudspeaker barked, but Max barely heard it. His mind drifted back to the track only for a moment, even though his body had never really left. Lighting a cigarette, he inhaled and closed his eyes. More and more each day Max drifted from one world to the next, looking for the reason he was where he was. Also, the more time he spent in the world behind his eyes the more control he seemed to have in the other one, the world where a person actually sensed things and moved around. He heard the chaos begin again. The stable area came to life as grooms and trainers involved themselves in pre-race readiness. Horses were curried, bandaged, stood in huge ice tubs, and given injections of various stimulants and pain relievers – some legal, some not. Caught in the limbo of the hot noon sun, Max remained half-asleep in the cab of his truck beneath the solitary shade tree on the backside at Ellis Park, and the motion of the outside world around him meant nothing. He tried to focus his memory on the cat again. The cat, he thought, the damned cat. If the cat had paid him no notice, maybe his life would have taken a different path, maybe he wouldn't wake at night with his dreams stinging him like sweat in an open sore.

He remembered clearly now that this day at Rachel's was the day he first became aware that forces were working on him beyond his control and even his conscious knowledge. It was the cat's strange gaze that generated a fog in his consciousness and the lack of control over the cat that made him lose his way in it. At Rachel's front door, he

felt the fog swallowing him, while the cat scurried away under the bushes. His stomach rose and fell as if he had just driven over a sharp hill.

The doorbell rang and no one answered. The doorbell rang again. She came from somewhere in the back of the house. It must have been her bedroom. Rachel liked to nap in the early afternoons. It was Thursday and the hospital sent medical record librarians home early on Thursdays so they could work them on the weekends without paying overtime. When she opened the door, her eyes focused on her feet and strands of hair floated over her left cheek. She seemed irritable and he thought the bell must have awakened her. Max wanted to hold her, tell her how much he had missed her, carry her back to the bedroom, lay her gently among the stuffed bears and puppies, and run his lips up and down her neck until she began to plead for him to never stop. Instead, he squeezed one word from somewhere behind his tongue. Out it popped in a bubble of saliva and doubt.

“Hello.”

“Max, what are you doing here? Why didn’t you phone?”

“I never had to phone before.”

“Things are different now. You’re in college. I didn’t even know you were home.”

“Where’s my class ring? How come it’s not on your finger?”

“I never wear it at home around my parents. They think I’m way too young to go steady. You know that.”

“Your parents are both at work. Aren’t you going to let me in?”

Rachel hesitated, half-stepped away from the door, then stopped. It seemed to

Max as if she had just remembered that she suffered from some strange, contagious disease and the house was quarantined.

“I can’t.”

“Can’t?”

“You know my dad would throw a fit if he found out I was alone in the house with a boy. Why don’t you come back after supper and we can take a long ride and talk.”

“Come on Rachel. Stop fucking around and let me in. Nobody’s going to be home for another four hours, at least.”

“Please Max, not today.”

There was urgency in her voice. He could have stood at the door and argued. Eventually she would have relented, but her tone of voice frightened him. He walked away. Driving down Main Street, Max struggled with paranoia, not the grown up kind that rose from the insanity of his own humanity. He suffered from the adolescent fear that Max Murphy wasn’t as important to everyone else in the world as he was to himself.

Did the scene at Rachel’s door warrant his paranoia? Absolutely? He knew this because a signal was passed to his conscious mind from somewhere deep in the recesses of his unconscious instinctual brain by means of the car radio. It was a sign that society had no center. No congruity, no reasonable flowing from one action to the next could occur on this day. The world had lapsed into chaos and Max Murphy was in the world. The signal began with the Byrds singing a great Dylan song – *hey mister tambourine man play a song for me, I’m not sleepy and there ain’t no place I’m going to, hey mister tambourine man play a song for me, in the jingle jangle morning I’ll come following you...*

Incredibly, the disc jockey cut over the top of this song with another record – *it was a one-eyed, one-horned flying purple people eater and it sure looked strange to me*. At the exact moment the best and the worst in rock music collided in his brain, Max turned the car around and traveled unseen back by the house. He could recognize the signs of imminent disaster, couldn't he? First the black cat cursed him and then the radio forewarned him. Rachel appeared on her front porch wrapped in the arms of a male nurse's aid named Jamie. They smiled. They kissed. Jamie patted her wonderful ass and jumped from the porch, jogging up the sidewalk toward town. Rachel stared after him, rubbing her bare arms in the cold as if to brush any remnant of Max Murphy away.

Max watched Jamie whistle a lively tune, indicated by the rhythm of the frosty breath escaping his mouth. He wanted to aim the Belair's grill at the other boy's back, jump the car over the curb, knock the boy down, and roll back and forth over his head until the sidewalk was stained with blood and brain. The useless heap of testosterone and acne left on the ground would never take anything from Max again.

He waved. Jamie waved back. It was the last time Max ever attempted any form of communication with Jamie or Rachel, but he had hoped that Jamie gave her the clap, or at least a good case of crabs. Once the picture of her scratching her crotch overwhelmed him, Max was able to begin closing down any feelings of love. When the love faded, he was left with the fear and anger.

He drove to the Palace Pool Room to eat a coney island, play pool, and forget the existence of women. In 1967, this other species of human animal was still outlawed at the Palace. It was a clean and pure sanctuary for the Southern Indiana male and Max was no exception. His dad had brought him here from the time he was old enough to sit on a

stool and watch baseball scores clatter out from beneath the glass dome on the ticker tape machine. It always amazed Max that information began its journey on a wire from major league ball stadiums in every corner of the United States, and reappeared magically at the Palace as blue ink stamped on narrow yellow paper.

Warm air hugged him as he walked in the door. The smell of stale cigar smoke, bacon grease, and pool chalk had a tranquilizing, almost hypnotic, effect. That fragrance was part of the fabric sewn into his father's long wool overcoat by threads of safety and comfort.

"Hey Murphy, how's it hanging?" A fat cook screamed over clanging pinball machines, the clack of cue balls, and the sizzle of burgers on a stainless steel grill. "I thought you was at college somewhere playing ball and balling sorority girls."

"You thought wrong. Give me a coney and a coke and less conversation."

"You look like shit," the fat cook said, and as he spoke, ashes from a cigarette dangling between his lips drifted downward onto the burger.

"Who's eating that crap?"

"See old Fuzzy Wilson at the end of the counter? He is."

"Don't you think you ought to scrap off the fucking ashes?"

"Why? He's half-dead and legally blind. Hell, the hearse from Johnson's Funeral Home brought him up here. They're circling like buzzards right now. This'll look like freshly ground pepper to him."

It was a true statement and made with no malice, just practicality. Max shut up and waited for his sandwich. Two farmers sat by the ticker tape machine, staring intently at the courthouse across the street. Two pigeons on the roof of that building stared back.

“The one on the right’s gonna fly first,” said the older farmer.

“Now is that your right, or the bird’s right?” The younger farmer spoke slowly and spit into an old brass spittoon on the floor.

“My right, dumbass,” said the older farmer in bib overalls as he flung his right arm toward the window.

“In your dreams.”

“Wanna bet?”

“How much?”

“How much you got in your pocket right now?”

“More than you.” The younger farmer reached into his denim jacket pocket and rattled some coins.

“How much is that?”

“Five bucks. Five bucks says the bird on the right flies first.”

Listening to the conversation, it came to Max that everything in life might be a gamble and only people willing to take a gamble actually lived. He never thought about stuff like that before Rachel betrayed him, but now he felt philosophic. Biting into his coney island, he watched the pigeon on the right lift off the courthouse roof and a Marine Corps sergeant walk out the basement door. The soldier crossed the street and blew in the Palace with a gust of cold air. He sat stiffly on the stool next to Max and ordered a black coffee. There were no curves in the man’s countenance. His entire being was a series of straight lines joined together by sharp corners. Heavy eyebrows created a dark boundary between his flint-like forehead and narrow gray eyes. The nose was a thin, vertical piece of gristle that pointed downward at a taut mouth. The mouth seemed to wait at attention

for some synaptic command. There were no wrinkles in his olive green uniform, only creases in the trousers and rows of brightly colored ribbons on the wool jacket.

“What’ll you have general.”

“I’m not a general. I’m a sergeant.” The Marine stared at Max. “As a matter of fact. I’m a recruiting sergeant.”

Goddamnit. Goddamnit I say. Give me a dollar for a beer boy.

A voice screamed at Max from the world outside his mind. It sounded like a birds cawing.

“Goddamnit boy. Get out of the truck and give me a dollar.”

“Shit Victor, lower your voice. You sound like a flock of crows fighting over a single piece of garbage.”

“Well, then pay attention. Pay attention when I speak to you, boy, instead of staring off into space like you was getting some head or something.”

Max blinked and the white stone on the restaurant front wall blinded him, as if a bare light bulb flicked on in a dark room or the knowledge of the universe unfolded from a single word. He was in the parking lot in front of the track kitchen at Ellis Park in the year 1972. Wasn’t he? The truck had stopped, but he had no memory of how it got there. He remembered parking under the shade tree and finding his ball glove and how his life had changed five years ago, but not driving up the hill and parking the truck. He opened the door, pushing Victor to the side, and climbed out of the cab.

“Don’t worry about my head, the one on my shoulders or the one in my pants. Worry about your own. What do you want?”

“YOU ARE DEAF, BOY. I want a dollar for a beer.”

“Why should I give you one?”

“Because you love the big horse and I take care of him. If I talk to Stormy right, he’ll win Saturday and make you a lot of money.”

“He’ll go off the three to five favorite and win whether you talk to him or not. I won’t make a dime.” Max reached into the pocket of his faded jeans and drew out a crumpled five-dollar bill. “You must’ve known I didn’t have any change Victor. Now, whatever you do, don’t waste this money on a decent meal.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Remember one thing. Me and that horse got something special goin’ on. He don’t win if I don’t tell him to.”

Victor grabbed the money and ran back into the track kitchen ahead of Max, who walked through the doorway slowly wondering if his old girl friend Rachel had almost gotten him killed. It wasn’t the Marine Corps, or the Vietcong. He never would have followed the recruiter out of the Palace Pool Room, joined the Corps, and gone to Vietnam if the girl he thought he loved, back when he thought he knew what love was, hadn’t screwed a male nurse. Max felt better. The present was beginning to come into focus through the lens of the past.

Chapter Four

The smell of sausage and bacon grease reminded Max of his hunger. His pulse quickened, whether from the smell of food or the sight of Sherry Devereaux sitting at a table with his boss Dan, Victor, and a blacksmith named Monty, he didn't know. Max ordered two eggs over easy, bacon, and toast from the cook, Marge. He took a cup of black coffee and walked towards the table.

The kitchen looked the same today as it did most days at noon. The tables along the west wall were crowded with grooms and hotwalkers arguing over who had the best horse in the best stable, drinking beer, laughing, and throwing their hands in different directions to punctuate their words. Occasionally one of the braver girls would venture an opinion and then promptly be ridiculed for having no balls, and therefore no intellect. Women were still an oddity on the backside of mid-western race tracks in the early 1970's and most of the men viewed them as an inferior species of beast to be used when expedient and disregarded at all other times, like the dogs that guarded the feed sheds. Max thought the prejudice a very stupid and costly one. Many of the girls he knew rode better than him. They were neater around the barn, gentler and cleaner with the horses, certainly more reliable workers. Most importantly, thought Max, if you have to spend all morning looking at a groom bent over a horse in the barn, why should it be an ugly old man? Max felt his attitude contributed, in a small way, to cultural progress. It also made him feel enlightened.

Exercise riders sat at the tables in the center of the room. If the racetrack was a closed caste system, riders would rank above grooms, who ranked above hotwalkers. The trainers would occupy the highest caste because they paid the bills and gave everyone

else employment. The jockeys had already left the kitchen and reported to the jock's room, a small hut next to the paddock where the horses were saddled for each race. Kentucky racing law required them to be out of contact with everyone except their valets and each other during the racing program every day. Max knew the reason for this, but he also knew that any tricks or fixes had been arranged long before post time. Max himself weighed too much to ever ride races, so he belonged in the middle caste of riders that sat eating a late breakfast and reading the Daily Racing Form.

At the four or five tables along the east wall some trainers who had no horses running that afternoon played cards and discussed the day's racing program or cocktail waitresses they had tried to hustle the night before. In an hour, the whole kitchen area would be deserted. The trainers that had no horses running on the day's card would go to the grandstand on the front side of the track and watch the program. The dumb ones would gamble, thinking they possessed some mystical insight into the order of finish in each race. Some exercise riders would tack their ponies and earn extra money, leading the thoroughbreds to the starting gate. The grooms and hotwalkers would return to their barns, drink beer, and nap till the time came to mix the evening feed. It was the rhythm of life on the racetrack. Max knew it well and its simplicity and consistency kept him in a groove that required only the basic animal instincts to survive.

"I see the big boss man has opened his table to peons," Max said, nodding at Victor. "Does that mean I can sit down too?"

"Hell boy. Hell I say. You sit your ass on a saddle all day anyway," Victor answered. "What you want to bother real people like us."

"If you're real, then life is a nightmare." Dan spoke with a beer can on the way to

his lips. "Let me buy you a beer. Monty and I were just talking about putting new shoes on Storm. I'd like to breeze him tomorrow with stickers on the back. The track's going to be a hard pull the next few days. Dean's got the damn track harrowed so fucking deep and it's so full of sand, the horse needs some extra traction. It's like running on a beach for god's sake. What do you think?"

"Not a bad idea. Just don't trim him too close, Monty," said Max as he sat down.

"You ever know me to trim a horse too close, especially this near a race?"

"Depends on whether or not your wife makes you mad the night before."

"She don't make me mad anymore. She knows who the boss is."

"You guys all think we live and breath to keep you happy," Sherry said, gazing at Max in a way that made him jealous of the air for touching her.

"I know you could make me happy right now, baby. If I wasn't such a good friend of your daddy's, we'd be rolling in the hay." Dan spoke, then drained his beer. Handing Victor a ten, he nodded toward the counter. "Get one for Max too, and bring me the change. I've already bought you three cans."

"You don't need to worry about rolling in the hay with me old man. The way you drink, you getting into me would be like sticking a wet noodle up a tiger's ass."

"I say. I say she got you there boss." Victor grabbed the money and walked to the counter. Max looked at Dan's eyes. They were already beginning to glaze over. He knew his boss had been drinking beer for the last couple of hours. He also knew that Dan would go to the races shortly and drink vodka all afternoon while watching the horses run. In many arenas of life that would make his boss a dysfunctional alcoholic. Max knew that from the sociology 101 class he attended drunk his one semester in college. But

academics live in musty old rooms filled with dusty old theories. Dan would walk away from the bar when the racing program was over and know the horse that won each race, the equipment they wore, the way they pulled up after, and whether or not buying them would be a good investment for his clients. He would go home, fall asleep by dark, and be back at the barn by 5am the next morning checking his charges and devising the morning's training schedule. Dan would do this seven days a week without complaint and with a considerable amount of talent. For this ability, Max regarded him with respect, if not awe.

Victor returned with beers and Max's breakfast. Monty lit a cigarette and Sherry asked Max playfully, "You going to drink Budweiser with eggs and bacon?"

"Why don't you and Max have a racetrack marriage, then you'd know what he eats and drinks all the time?" The smoke from his lungs punctuated Monty's words. Sherry gave him a dirty look and stood up.

"I've had a racetrack marriage or two and if I wanted another one, you can be damn sure I wouldn't ask you to pick my partner." She was embarrassed and Max knew it. Monty must have struck some kind of nerve because he'd never seen anything get to her. She could even clean a stallion's shaft without batting an eye. Sherry turned and walked out the door.

"Thanks for running off the best looking woman at this race meet you asshole." Max smacked Monty across his arm.

"How'd I know she was so sensitive?"

"Who said she's sensitive? No woman likes to be called a whore."

"I didn't call her a whore."

“A racetrack marriage is nothing more than a one night stand that turns into two nights. Women don’t think like we do. Hell, you’re married. You should know that.”

“Yeah, but my wife don’t seem to think at all.”

“That’s obvious by her choice of husbands.”

“Enough bullshit,” said Dan. “Max, set up a time with Monty and hold Storm Strike while he does the shoe work. Oh, and then don’t forget to pack the feet with mud when he’s done. I want to pull out any heat from the trimming. If that horse gets a sore foot, I’ll strangle both of you. I’m going to the races.”

“Yeah, I’m going to the races. I gotta find Monk and then I’m going to the races,” said Victor. “I’ll see you there, boss.”

“I’m not giving you anymore money, you little shit. Don’t bother me over there.”

“Yeah,” Monty said. “If you get too close to Dan, people might see the resemblance and think you was brothers. Especially if they knew you was both from Kentucky and your parents could be first cousins.”

Dan stood and flipped his middle finger up under Monty’s chin. “Just shoe my horse right asshole. No foot, no horse.”

“No horse, no horse I say, no need for ugly blacksmiths.” Victor followed Dan out the door like a lost child and Max wondered if the little parrot man really did have any family at all.

Chapter Five

Trainers, bring your horses to the paddock for the first race –

The loudspeaker echoed in Sherry's ear as she walked back toward her barn thinking about Monty's comment. She sidestepped horse owners that strolled the backside area in red, yellow, blue, and green designer clothes, sightseeing as if her home were a carnival midway. These professional people who bought racehorses for tax shelters and prestige disgusted her. To them the animals were just another affectation like their sunglasses or their BMW's. They hired trainers and treated them like household servants. They left their law practices, car dealerships, medical clinics, and corporate offices one or twice a month to watch their horses run. It was a game to them. They had no knowledge of or concern for what went into training and caring for an athlete that weighed a half a ton, ate twelve pounds of grain a day, and like a child, had to be nurtured from dawn to dusk three hundred and sixty-five days a year. None of them ever sat up all night to nurse one through colic, or got their hearts broken when one shattered a leg and had to be put down. When one went bad, they just walked into an auction careful not to break a nail or scuff a wingtip, and bought a new one.

Grooms with dark brown iodine stains and dirt on their tee shirts and faded jeans hustled past her to make post time. The outrider in his bright crimson shirt and white pants mounted a pony. Heat shimmered in blanching waves from the parking lot. All Sherry saw through the humid haze was a multi-colored jumble of flashes as if the hot breeze turned a broken kaleidoscope. She was angered by some blurred idea in her mind and

tried to focus on it, make it go away.

Jack Becker brought a roan colt in a racing bridle out of the long, low barn next to the kitchen and headed him for the paddock area. The first race was a maiden race, and Jack's untried two-year-old colt was nervous. Sherry's shadow spooked him. He reared twice, flailing his front hooves at the air. His neck and girth were covered with white foam already. The hooves sparred with the shadow like a boxer's fists with a speed bag. Sherry jumped away from the huge strawberry gray form just in time to miss being struck.

"Jesus, Sherry watch where you're going."

"School your damn horse Jack and you watch where you're going."

She walked and sweated. The sweat seemed to carry the anger out of her, to grant her absolution from her own emotions, like the weekly confessions forced upon her at catholic school during her childhood. Was it what Monty said that upset her, or who he said it to? Sherry loved men, but she didn't like them. Those two feelings caused no conflict in her mind. She had grown up in a world overwhelmed and dominated by males. Her babysitters were men. Men taught her to ride and train horses, to drink beer, to cook, to curse. Her father's jockey friends had always treated her as a mascot or good luck charm. She loved their collective rhythm, swagger, and arrogance, even their smell. She felt safe in their presence, as long as they were men. When they became an individual man, Sherry was filled with suspicion and insecurity. Every time she had peeled a singular man from the herd as a confidante, a trusted friend, a lover, they had proved inadequate at best, dangerous at worst. So she found more comfort and safety by keeping a strict classification system in the front of her mind.

That's where the anger came from. It was really directed inwardly, at her by her. When Monty made his remark about racetrack marriages in front of Max, it bothered Sherry that Max might have thought her cheap or easy. The man was physically attractive, lean, and athletic, with light brown hair and a deep tan. He had a mysterious, maybe even exotic, white scar above his right eyebrow and moved with an animal grace that excited her, but Sherry had slept with better looking men. His eyes infuriated her. They were a reflective green that seemed to see inside every person they were trained on, and at the same time, glaze over with a ceramic sadness that kept anyone from seeing into him. She was beginning to like this one man, and she hated it.

Chapter 6

Victor got scared when Dan warned him not to expect any beer at the races.

Instead of riding in the truck to the trainers' parking lot with his boss, he shuffled down the long cinder path to the barn. He felt like not much could scare him. He'd just about seen it all after forty years of hardbooting at every goddamned second-rate racetrack in the Midwest. Hadn't he seen stallions try and mount tractors? Wasn't he standing right there when Ben Johnson's horse bolted a turn at Sportsman Park, ran through the fence, and gutted itself on a broken pipe? That was the same winter the mob took over the feed concession there and raised the price of hay to eight dollars a bale. Didn't he get his own ribs cracked trying to rescue a casted horse? He was on the track when black men had to eat in different places than white, as if they was less than human. Now there was women everywhere. Hell, some women even rode races. He guessed they called them jockettes. But to spend the afternoon with Dan busting his chops and not buying any beer, that scared him. A man could suffer a lot. Yes a man could suffer a lot, but not going dry in the middle of summer.

Victor breathed in ragged pants like a dog. He stopped walking at the open tack room door and leaned against the concrete wall. When his chest quit hurting, he stepped into the dim light and pulled a wool blanket that had *American Legion Purse* stitched on it away from the only window. The sun stumbled in.

“Wake up. Wake up I say, you lazy fuck.”

His friend Monk who looked to be in his mid-fifties, but who could have been much younger, napped on an old army cot piled high with horse blankets. The box fan whirred loudly and Monk struggled to open his swollen eyes. The room was heavy with

the smell of blackstrap molasses, oats, Murphy's oil soap, and leather. Bridles hung from nails and tack hooks. Saddles rested on wooden sawhorses. Victor sat down on a metal barrel full of rolled oats and breathed deeply. He was home.

"The first race is on the way to the paddock. You got any beer left?" Victor watched Monk struggle to sit up and reach under the cot.

"One."

"One? I say one. I had four in the tub when I went to the kitchen."

"You bring me a sandwich back?"

"Why, I say why I got to feed you? I didn't take you to raise."

"I knew you wouldn't bring me nothing to eat. Too busy kissing Dan's ass to worry about me."

Monk pulled the last can of Knickerbocker beer from the metal tub beneath the cot. Coughing, he leaned over to a wooden crate, took a Marlboro off it, and lit the cigarette. The last few days, every time Victor looked at Monk, he thought of death. It was starting to make him nervous, like he was going crazy or something. Max said, if you thought you was going crazy, then you wasn't really going crazy, but looking at Monk, Victor wasn't sure. His face was the color of peanut butter. His legs turned blue when he sat down to long. He had a stomach that hung over his shorts like a basketball, his left eye twitched, and he coughed when he wasn't talking. Victor didn't believe anyone who looked like Monk was long for this world.

"Hey. I say hey, don't drink that beer. It's mine."

"You know I can't wake up without one. Besides, it's hot anyway."

"Fuck, I say fuck you and your hot beer." Victor stood nervously, trying to roll a

cigarette. He was a little shaky, but got the job done with a minimum of spillage. Monk opened the beer, turned it up, and drained the can with a few gulps. "Now what I'm going to do? The boss said for me to stay away from him at the races. No money, no money for Victor."

"Go borrow some from Max. He just came in and got a shank to hold Storm for the blacksmith. He's at the other end of the barn. Get some cash and we'll buy a twelve pack."

"Can't"

"Can't? Why not?"

"Done did" Victor laughed and shook the five dollar bill at Monk. "Done did."

"You little prick, trying to make me feel sorry for you. I'll give you a can of beer." Monk stood, unzipped his pants, and pissed perfectly into the empty can. "I never spill a drop. Practice makes perfect."

"Yeah, well that's all you got to do with your dick anyway."

"So you say, but the preacher woman was giving me the eye yesterday at the track kitchen. She might be pretty tight pussy, what with all that preaching and no fucking."

"She don't want you. She wants someone with big balls and worthy of salvation, like me."

The two men left the room. The afternoon sun slapped Victor with a heavy, humid hand and the sweat poured. He saw Max taking Storm Strike from his stall as Monty, the blacksmith, drove up in an old orange Toyota pick up. Victor waved and fell in step behind Monk, moving slowly toward the grandstand on the front side of the track. He was glad they had enough money for more beer and glad the first race was getting ready

to start. Somewhere in the back of his mind though, he had a vague uneasiness and he knew if it could be pulled forward into his gladness, it would spoil the day. It would be death, not the idea of it – why it came or what its purpose was. Victor never bothered to think in those terms. He never considered the science of it either – how it came or how it might be temporarily avoided. To him, death was the heart of the fog, something everything had to get to eventually. Horses died quickly and violently on the track, as did people sometimes, and all he knew now was the presence of the fog whenever he and Monk were together. He spoke to the back of Monk's head as they walked.

“Remember, I say, remember when we was at Latonia last winter and we saved up all our Knickerbocker beer cans for the recycle guy?”

Monk stopped and turned. “Yeah. We had enough cans we should've made a killing. How many did we have, four, maybe five garbage bags full? We could've got enough money to keep us in beer for at least a week, if he'd bought all of them.”

“Max took us over there in the truck and the guy put the magnet on them...”

“And it wouldn't even pick the fuckers up.” Monk began to chuckle.

By now, Victor walked even with Monk, although he was mad because Monk walked too fast. “He says, ‘I don't know what these cans is made of, but it sure the fuck ain't aluminimum.’ And Max goes out and buys us a case of Budweiser cause he feels sorry for us that we're drinking ‘horse piss in lead cans’ and we *did* recycle them Budweiser cans. What do you think that means?” Victor laughed loudly.

“What does what mean?” asked Monk, as Charlie Broderick stopped his pickup to let them both hop in back and ride the rest of the way.

“When what you think you got ain't what you got, but something entirely

different.”

“Then you got a big surprise coming and not all surprises is good ones.”

“My point exactly.”

Victor tried to roll another cigarette and every time he began to lick the paper, Charlie hit a bump. Tobacco spilled. Victor cursed and wondered if Charlie hit the bumps on purpose.

Chapter Seven

Monty lifted his tools from the bed of the truck and tied his leather apron around his waist while Max centered Storm Strike in the shedrow and rubbed the horse's nose gently, whispering in the gelding's ear, calming any fear the blacksmith's presence generated. Monty set a wooden toolbox in the dirt and took a pair of clippers from it. He lifted the left front leg, rested the hoof on his knee, and began clipping the heads off the horseshoe nails. Max jiggled the shank chain across Storm's nose, keeping his attention. When the nails were clipped, the blacksmith opened the clippers, gripped the shoe, and pulled it from the hoof. He traded the tool for a heavy metal file and, with a precise stroke, filed the overgrown hoof down flat. As he worked with his back to Max, the words seemed to roll around his head and hang in the heavy air. Max tried to see them as if they were in a circle of white paper above some cartoon figure in the comic section of the newspaper. If he saw the language as he heard it, then the meaning couldn't hide.

"When'd you start galloping for old Dan?"

"About six months ago, I guess. I was working the meet at Fairgrounds and looking for a way out of New Orleans."

"Didn't like the city, huh?"

"Loved it. That's why I had to leave."

Monty gave Max a strange look over his shoulder, pulled a new shoe from a box of four, measured it against the horse's hoof, placed it on his portable anvil, and adjusted it with a small hammer.

"Heard of people leaving places they don't like, but never places they like."

"Sometimes when you like something too much, it can kill you."

“Pussy can kill ya, if it’s somebody else’s wife.”

“Yeah, sorta like that. New Orleans was someone else’s wife.”

Max knew the blacksmith had no idea what he was talking about, but conversation of any kind made the work go faster. The faster the work went the less time wasted. The less time wasted, the more Max had a sense of accomplishing something. He always felt guilty when he was doing nothing. A man who lived on borrowed time, a man who should have died in combat only has so much time left to get things done. It made no difference what those things were. He just had to feel like his life had been spared for some reason.

When the shoe had been corrected, Monty held it in place and drove small nails through the shoe around the rim of the hoof quickly and perfectly. Releasing the horse’s leg, Monty moved to the left rear and started the procedure all over. Max watched him work and began to realize that art wasn’t a label that could be put on old paintings. Art was work done uniquely and well. An artist was person whose work defined his soul. Max had no art, just memories and a willingness to punish his body on a horse. Maybe learning to do one thing magnificently, like he saw Monty doing, would let him live outside the memories. Could he learn to gallop a racehorse magnificently, artistically? Did he even have a soul to define? Who knew the answer to that one?

“I heard you was some kind of war hero. That true?”

“I was in the war. That doesn’t make me a hero.”

“You kill a lot of people in Vietnam?”

“Did you?”

“Didn’t go. I’m from Kentucky. People from Kentucky are too smart to fight over

anything but a racehorse or a woman. That make you mad?"

"Because you're from Kentucky?"

"Because I didn't go."

"Not particularly. Nothing makes me feel too much of anything anymore. I am curious how you beat the draft, though. You look to be prime age for cannon fodder."

"Got one leg shorter than the other. Us Kentucky boys always got an angle."

Monty straightened up and stretched his back, then took a small, white towel from his toolbox and wiped the sweat from around his eyes. Max knocked slow moving flies away from Storm Strike's ears and gently patted the gelding's neck to keep him quiet.

"You're a lucky man. Not everybody from Kentucky stayed out of the draft and now I'm finished talking about the war."

"Okay by me. Didn't mean to step on any toes. It don't mean shit here on the racetrack anyway."

Monty finished shoeing the left rear and moved to right front. The horse was getting restless and so was Max. He could feel his mind drifting. At first, he fought the surge of memory, like a swimmer might struggle against an undertow. He pulled and pulled toward the shore, but the current running beneath the surface dragged him under. Max was drowning in his own mind. He kept seeing Maynard's face. Maynard was a man like Monty, a man with an angle, a good old boy from Hazard, Kentucky. He and Max were thrown together in a cavernous old warehouse full of medical equipment and strangers in white coats, the induction center in downtown Louisville.

His stomach fell through his ass with fear when he walked in the door. An ugly

man with a pock marked face and black-rimmed glasses, whose only name seemed to be Corporal, screamed and pushed Max from one line to another. By 11am, he had been measured, injected, poked in every orifice, prodded, and finally forced to cough as a pale doctor stroked his balls, looking for someone referred to as "Mr. Little Hernia." After lingering lovingly on his knees, the doctor rose and told him to pull up his shorts. Max thought it was over, but the ugly corporal ran in screaming again.

"Follow the blue line. Follow the blue line to Vision. Hey you, the black guy in dirty underwear, I said *blue*."

In a room where eye charts papered the wall, Max met Maynard Wilson. Maynard drove moonshine for a living because he was only seventeen and when arrested, his father and uncles were sure he would be tried as a juvenile and get off with a slap on the wrist. Everything worked out better than even Maynard anticipated when he was eventually caught, because his particular judge actually believed rehabilitation was more than a word. Or so he told Max in rapid-fire sentence fragments while the line they were in shortened slowly.

"This sorry son-of-a-bitchin' judge thinks he's smarter than me. Gives me a choice of goin' to work camp till I'm eighteen and then doin' a stretch in Lexington for three more years. *Or*, enlistin' in the service for four years 'cause the military would rehabilitate me."

"Seems to me the military might be a death sentence for you, Maynard."

"If I was normal, maybe. But I ain't normal. See, that's where I outfoxed the old bastard. I tell his bailiff to walk me right on down to the recruiting station and sign me up, all the while knowin' I'm blind in my left eye..."

“So you’re thinking once he sees you sign your name and clears your record, you come down here and flunk the physical...”

“...and be free as a bird by sundown.”

“Pretty smart.”

“Damn straight. It’s genius. We got special sense in Hazard, Kentucky ‘cause we’re all related.”

The line moved quicker and the closer they got to the eye chart, the more Maynard smiled. One by one recruits peeled off the front end in four directions. They stood frozen, one hand over one eye, then the other. Like a tent revival, the room echoed with insensible tongues. ADWZUXYBLKKGIVVE. Maynard stepped right. Max stepped left. The men in white coats pointed to various rows of letters, which Max read perfectly. As he left the building, he heard the boy from Hazard whimper in the background and the optometrist answer.

“But...I’m blind in my left eye.”

“I said, please cover your left eye and read the chart.”

By the time his new friend caught him at a traffic light, the only thing going on in Max’s head was a Led Zeppelin song. The words danced around flash card images of Rachel screwing the male nurse. *Been dazed and confused for so long it’s not true, wanted a woman but I wound up with you.*

“Mother Fucker...Mother Fucker. I’m fucked, totally fucked.” Maynard seemed disoriented, incapable of getting unfucked. “I’m really fucked. Can you believe how fucked I am? Those fuckers took a blind man...*a blind man for god’s sake.*”

“You’re not blind. You see twenty-twenty out of your right eye.”

“So what?”

“So, you’re right handed. It only takes your right eye to sight down a rifle barrel and shoot somebody.”

“Jesus, why didn’t I think of that.”

“Well, I’m used to dealing with unsound logic. Remember I told you, I went to college in Kentucky for four months.”

Both young men laughed and walked down Fourth Street toward the seedy hotel where the government housed inductees and enlistees overnight, before shipping them to various boot camps. Along the way, they passed several topless bars and blue movie houses. Max had never seen so much untouchable flesh for sale in such a small area of buildings and city blocks.

“Let’s get drunk and watch some strippers tonight. Bus don’t leave for Paris Island till tomorrow morning late,” said Maynard.

“We’re too young to drink, dumbass,” said Max.

“Ain’t that a bitch. Old enough to die, but not to get pukin’ drunk. Lucky for us I got a quart of daddy’s best homemade stuff in my suitcase.”

They walked through the lobby of the hotel, past three winos snoozing in dusty chairs, past a hooker who smiled, flicked her tongue, and winked at them. The desk clerk, a dirty, pock-faced man in a greasy tee shirt, threw a key at Max and nodded. A boy about twelve years old kicked and rattled the cigarette machine trying to loosen a pack of smokes. Heat and humidity were everywhere, like a disease. Max couldn’t see them, but could feel them killing every living thing in Louisville, sucking breath and soul away. Only the boy at the cigarette machine had enough strength left to fight back. Each angry

punch and kick into the machine was a blow against the uncontrollable spread of infectious summer. But even the boy lost the battle when the glass pane across the front shattered loudly and brought the desk clerk screaming and waving a black jack. The glass crunched under running feet as both the boy and the man ran out a fire door at the back of the hotel.

The dimly lit and narrow hallway that led to room 107 stank of piss and stale beer. Max felt vomit rising in his throat. He gagged and when the door to the room opened, he rushed past the two beds into the bathroom. Bending double over the toilet, Max waited. Nothing happened. Maynard called him to come get a drink. He controlled his urge, and sweating heavily, walked back to the main room.

“Hey, you alright?”

“Got sick to my stomach. It’s too damn hot. It’s always too hot here in the summer.”

“Not near as hot as where we’re goin’.” Maynard poured two shots of clear liquid into paper cups on the nightstand. “This’ll make you feel better fast.”

Rachel told Max from the back seat of his '57 Chevy that everone always remembers the first time they make love. In light of her current activities, Max doubted that. His faith was restored however as he tasted Maynard’s moonshine. It was the first time he made love to good whiskey. It seemed to Max that corn liquor properly enjoyed, like sex, caused transcendence from one plane of being to another. The first shot frightened him till it hit the back of his tongue. By the third shot, he was a hummingbird draining the nectar of life from a rose bush. When Maynard finally mumbled, “Let’s go see some naked women,” Max was a walking orgasm.

They sauntered out into the sweltering Louisville night. Passing pawnshops, coffee shops, topless bars, and one combination lawyer-bail bond office, they finally stopped in front of a worn, red brick movie theater. The neon marquee spelled out *Art Films and Live Girls*, and directly below those words, the title of the current film, *Debbie Does Dallas – in color*. Max watched his heavy set and slightly bearded companion thrust both hands into the pockets of *OshCosh Bigosh* denim overalls as if the blue-eyed young man might need to squeeze a sigh from somewhere below his stomach.

“This must be our place,” Maynard said.

“It doesn’t look like much on the outside.”

“These places never do. They spend all their money hirin’ quality entertainment.”

A bored girl with yellow skin and too much blue eyeliner took their money and promised with a wink that they would enjoy the show. Inside, the air was cool and smelled like popcorn and Wild Irish Rose wine. Max counted six men and one person who could have been either gender. They were spread out in various sections, which seemed to give them each a feeling of privacy. A man with hair the color and viscosity of used motor oil came from behind a dirty white curtain and stood above them on a wooden stage.

- *Ladies and Gentlemen* – His voice resonated through the auditorium. – *You are about to see a live show that will dazzle, deprave, and drain your very soul. Miss Chastity Flame will perform her famous fire dance without so much as a shoestring covering her voluptuous body. Please welcome Miss Chastity Flame.*

“This here’s what we came to Louisville for big boy,” Maynard whispered.

A middle aged woman strutted across the stage as the Coasters hit song *Little Egypt* played loudly in the background. Her tits were huge and heavy, hanging almost to her waist. They were the biggest tits Max had ever seen. The single spotlight outlined blue veins on her legs and black pubic hair. She moved in slow jerks, like a machine whose batteries were in dire need of recharging. As the song reached its bridge chord, Chastity moaned and fell on her knees, exposing the lips of her vagina. Reaching right, she picked a thin metal rod, left by the emcee, off the floor and lit the cotton ball stuck on one end. The moaning grew louder. She ground her wide ass into the floor and brought the fire down to floor level. Chastity hunched the flame. The seven people squirmed and some rubbed their crotches. Max was hypnotized, motionless. Maynard screamed, "Fuck the fire baby. Fuck the fire." And she did, as if his voice was the voice of God and she was Joan of Arc. Chastity rammed the wire rod deep inside herself, sighed, and extracted a smoking piece of cotton.

On the walk back to the hotel, Max kept seeing Chastity as a young woman with Rachel's face. She was studying ballet, caring for her sick mother, earning money to pay for her crippled brother's operation by stripping. He felt sad that circumstance beyond control forced such a nice person to work in a filthy place. He hated life as the whiskey wore off and wished that he could do something for this poor, mistreated woman. It never occurred to him that she might have had a choice, any more than the little boy who murdered the cigarette machine had one.

By 7am the next morning, Max's headache had erased all thought of Chastity. Even his sadness and anger over Rachel's treachery was replaced by a violent urge to wretch. He did. He did again and again, hugging the toilet bowl as if it was a steering

wheel.

“Drivin’ the old moonshine bus, I see. Well, hurry up and finish puking. We gotta eat some breakfast before we travel.” Max puked again.

On the long ride to South Carolina, he and Maynard became close friends. It didn’t seem unusual to Max because the intensity of their new experience was a shared intensity and time sped up. In eighteen hours they had known each other for eighteen years. Once the Greyhound bus passed the guard shack and the security fence at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Paris Island, South Carolina and stopped beside a white-washed building, Max lost Maynard in the chaos the way he might have lost a ballcap in a violent windstorm.

A man wearing a large brimmed “Smoky the Bear” hat and with drool speckled around his lips charged onto the parade deck. He screamed, cursed, kicked, and pushed the entire busload of pimpled recruits into four ragtag lines.

- My name to you is Drill Instructor, Sir, but my friends call me Spasdick. You WILL know why before this two months is over. I hate all of you scudsy, pimple-faced, maggot mother fuckers – Spasdick screamed as he trotted up and down between the rows of frightened young men, including Max and Maynard. – Your mothers are all whores and fathers are all queers. In the next eight weeks I will make men of you, or I WILL kill you. Do you understand me?

YES SIR, DRILL INSTRUCTOR SIR. The entire group shouted in perfect harmony. Three recruits pissed in their pants, Maynard laughed. Spasdick slapped him so hard he almost fell. Max forced himself not to feel sorry for Maynard. The possibility of Death began coming into him, filling him like some type of emotional Novocain,

numbing his senses so that whatever happened in the future, he could remain unbothered.

Once boot camp was over, Max and Maynard were sent to the same outfit in Vietnam, 3rd Battalion 9th Marine Regiment. Max went straight to an infantry platoon, but Maynard, with his special talent, was assigned to the motor pool in DaNang. In a way, Max was glad for his friend because driving supply trucks along Highway 1 was a hell of a lot safer than beating the bush for Viet Cong and Maynard didn't deserve to be in combat. He was drafted by the legal system, a victim of his circumstance who, unlike Max, had no choice. When Max came back to the rear area in Da Nang after his first long search and destroy operation, he went to the motor pool to find his buddy and share a few beers. The First Sergeant in charge told Max in a casual tone that Maynard was running a load of c-rations up to a firebase called "The Rockpile" when his truck had run over a mine and the clutch plate got buried in Maynard's forehead, or what was left of it.

So much for Kentucky boys with an angle, thought Max as he heard the clanging of blacksmith tools. So much for believing that life existed for your benefit, no matter where you came from. Whatever force was out there, turning the world, making the sun shine and the wind blow, didn't pay much attention to the people affected by the normal operation of the planet or the intersection of those people with their angles. Monty was untying his leather apron and backing away from the horse.

"You been awful quiet the last twenty minutes. Didn't mean to spook you with all that Vietnam talk."

"You didn't. I just daydream a lot anymore. Hell, don't you think about pussy?"

"Not since I got married. Walk that horse down the shedrow. I want to make sure

everything's even and he ain't sore from the trimming.”

Max walked Storm Strike back and forth twice. When Monty was satisfied that the shoes were right, they put the horse away. Max packed his hooves with a mixture of mud, Epsom salts, and Absorbine, hung the hayrack on the stall door jamb, and drove to his motel room for an afternoon nap.

Chapter Eight

The air conditioner thumped as the compressor kicked in. The room was very cold, but the sheets were soaked with sweat. When Max awoke and sat up in bed the sweat on his back vaporized, replaced by a sudden chill. He grabbed his cigarettes from the nightstand, lit one with his old Marine Corps Zippo, and picked up his watch. It was 6:45PM. THE BALLGAME! The softball game started in fifteen minutes. Max had napped for almost four hours. He might as well plan for a night out. There was no way he could fall asleep again before midnight after sleeping all afternoon, as if sleep came easy anyway. He threw on his shorts, tee shirt, and sneakers, ran out the door, and drove back to the track.

The race program had ended. The parking lot stretched out before him, a vast, empty asphalt plain littered with paper cups, wadded tip sheets, and losing tickets. He turned past the guard shack and waved at old Henry. The night watchman looked up from the newspaper he was reading, smiled, and motioned him by. On the hill at the far turn of the racetrack, Max could see beyond the detention barn to the softball field. People were already on the field playing catch, shagging fly balls, and taking practice swings.

As Max passed the detention barn, he saw the state veterinarian drawing blood from a horse to test it for illegal drugs, probably the winner of the last race. “Wonder if the NFL will ever do that to the winners of a football game,” he said aloud to no one.

“Hurry up and park it Max. The jockeys are ready to play. They think they can beat us.” The track chaplain’s voice sliced through the still air.

Past centerfield the sun melted across the top of the levee that kept the Ohio River from flooding the barn area. The whole sky was melting into the color of smoked salmon

and for a moment, as he parked the truck, Max was quiet. He heard the laughter from the field, the shuffle of feet, the clap of hands, the thump of leather, the crack of wood, and he was quiet. A baseball field was one of the few places Max felt at home. His earliest and best memories unfolded in his mind like snapshots in an album. He could almost see his mom turning the pages and pointing.

There was Max, playing catch with his dad when he was five years old and had no front teeth. Did he know his dad played professional baseball before the war? Did he know his dad might have made the majors if not for World War II and the Nazis killing all those Jews and his dad helping to save the world at the expense of a promising career? There was Max in his dirty Little League All-Star uniform surrounded by his teammates after a game winning single in the state tournament. There he was in 1962, just a few weeks before his dad died. They were at Busch Stadium in St. Louis. The Cardinals played the Dodgers. Oh, he remembered that game well. His dad had an old friend, Gil Hodges, get them tickets right behind home plate. Sandy Koufax was on the mound for the Dodgers. Max's dad always did things with a purpose. Max led the whole Little League in hitting with an average of .431. He had become an arrogant little shit, bragging that he could hit any pitcher anywhere anytime.

Max's father sat him in the bleachers right behind the Dodger catcher for nine innings and he watched Koufax mesmerize the Cardinal batters with a hundred mile an hour fastball that looked no bigger than an aspirin tablet. His dad never spoke during the whole game, except to ask him if he wanted peanuts, but as the ball dipped and ducked away from Lou Brock and Stan Musial and left them swinging at the air, Max got the message. He never ran his mouth about his talent again.

Most of his childhood and adolescence was spent on a baseball field and ball games, like horses, always kept him close to his father even after his father died. Maybe after all that time competition, any competition, began to define him as a person. Maybe that's one of the reasons he joined the Marine Corps. Maybe that's why he loved horseracing so much. When he competed Max knew who he was, what was supposed to be done, and how to do it. In the contest, there was no time for decisions. The rightness and wrongness of actions were decided simply. Somebody won and somebody lost. A person could live comfortably in an absolute world like that, even if it was an illusion.

"Didn't think you were going to make the game, Max."

He heard her voice beside his truck and the gravel in it excited him.

"Hi Sherry. I overslept, almost slept right through the game."

"Too much partying?"

"Not enough really."

"Maybe we need to fix that problem."

"Maybe we could, if you'd drink a few beers with me after the game."

"It's a thought. Right now I've got to go get my dad and the jockeys fired up to beat your ass."

"Hey, but you're a horse trainer. You should play on our team."

"Sorry, family obligations."

She walked slowly and confidently away, a long braid of auburn hair swishing back and forth across her back like a metronome. Max fell in love for a moment. At least he thought it might be love. He never seemed to have feelings anymore before devoting serious thought as to what those feelings should be or could be.

Chaplain Sanders, in his role as umpire, called the Horsemen onto the diamond and the first jockey picked up a bat. For the next two hours the green field between the levee and the detention barn was alive with all the sounds that kept Max alive. Laughter, swearing, the clink of bottles and the crinkle of beer cans, the high pitched squeals of children, the giggle of women, the wheezing of fat men as they tried to run bases, the swish of lean men through the grass as they fielded and threw, all the sounds echoed in the twilight like homing beacons.

When the game finally ended no one knew the score, but the jockeys had won. Max was one the few *young* men playing for the Horsemen's Association, and he expected the outcome. Defeat was easy to take when you were waiting for it. He hated to lose anything, but having lost so much the last few years, a softball game between a bunch of friendly drunks didn't really seem so important.

"Maxy boy, I ispect y'all need some mo' young blood if'n you gonna whip up on us jockeys, cher. C'est la vie"

"Shit. Drop the phony Cajun accent Manny. You've lived in the Midwest since Sherry was a baby. You probably haven't seen the bayou or ate a mudbug in fifteen years, now have you?"

Max didn't like Manny Devereoux very much. He respected the fact that Manny was a good rider and that Manny had sacrificed a career in the big time to raise his daughter. But that was respect, not affection. The old jockey had an air about him that reeked of insincerity. He couldn't be trusted. There was a vacuum in his gray eyes that made Max wary. Sherry was devoted to her dad. Max knew it and would never tell anyone how he felt because Sherry was a great girl and didn't deserve to have her

illusions shattered. Regardless, Max always felt uncomfortable around Manny. It was as if the two of them were on patrol in 'Nam and both of them were concerned about keeping Manny alive first. Max tossed his ball glove through the open window of his truck and opened the door, hoping Manny would take the hint and go away. Sherry was still on the field talking with the chaplain and a couple of grooms that worked for Warner Hughes' stable.

"Okay you got me boy. But a lot of people think my accent's charming. It makes me authentic ya know." Manny removed his ball cap and rubbed an arthritic hand over his balding and sweating head. Max noticed a slight tic above the left eye when Manny spoke.

"Sorry Manny, but it'll take more than words to make you authentic."

"You don't like me much do ya?"

"I don't dislike you much either. I'm kind of neutral on the subject."

"You neutral on the subject of my daughter?"

Max winced and felt his face flush. The hairs rose on the back of his neck as if he were a dog backed into a corner.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it means. I seen ya looking at her during the game. She's a good looking girl, like her mamma."

"Yeah, she is. Now, what are you trying to get at. You see me everyday on the track and you never say more than two words. I don't have any money. I don't ride races. I've never been out with your daughter, although that might change someday. Neither one of us are big on small talk, Manny. Get to the point. The only thing I can offer you is

information. What do you want to know?"

Manny shuffled his feet. He glanced at the detention barn, bent over, picked up a cinder from the road, and tossed it toward the levee.

"You ain't overly friendly boy, but you talk straight and I like that."

"Well that certainly makes my day."

"My old horse, Native Son's got about one good race left in him and I'm broke. I'm riding him against Storm Strike in the Governor's Handicap day after tomorrow. I want to know how good Dan's horse is right now. If I can't beat him, I want to put my money on my horse to place. You and I both know it's gonna be a two horse race down the stretch. There was a day I wouldn't had to ask that question because when Native was good, he was real good."

"He's still a pretty good horse. He deserves to be retired to stud before he pops that bad knee. And, you know that I'm not talking to anybody about any horse in Dan's stable. The only thing I can tell you is what you can see very morning on the track. Storm is training like a bear and he's going to be tough to beat."

"There'd be a lot of money to be made on an exacta where your horse finishes second and mine finishes first, a lot of money."

The first fog of total darkness began creeping across the field and Max wanted to hit Manny on his sharp chin while he still had enough light to watch the jockey wince and fall. But, he stepped on the running board and slid into the truck instead.

"Probably, but I don't have any control over that. I get horses ready to go to the starting gate and Raphael takes them out of the gate."

"What if when you breezed your horse tomorrow, he ran off with you and got a

little over tired. That'd be nobody's fault. He's big and strong and feeling good. Maybe you couldn't hold him."

"Maybe you can't hold your tongue because it's running off right now. If your horse beats Dan's horse it'll be because he outraces him, nothing else."

"Yeah, you're right. I wasn't suggesting anything. Just wondering out loud."

"Do that wondering somewhere else."

"You might need a favor someday. It's always good to keep your options open."

"You can leave now Manny."

The jockey walked away and Max felt dirty. The sweat and the sand from the ball field grated against his skin, but the feeling was deeper than that. He expected little from his fellow humans since the war, maybe even from himself, but disloyalty could never be excused. If a man proved disloyal to the other men that trusted him, then he couldn't be a worthwhile man. Dan Wilson paid him to gallop horses, but Dan also trusted him with the knowledge that came from galloping those horses. He would have sooner left the racetrack and never come back than betray Dan's confidence or intentionally hurt one of Dan's horses, especially for something that had almost no value to him, like money. Loyalty was the one ideal that stayed constant with Max, a gift given to him by Jack Robinson. Max got a cigarette, lit it, and stared through the truck windshield at Sherry picking up the bats and balls and putting them in an olive drab duffle bag. Victor distracted him walking across the field toward their barn. The old fart must have been out taking his nightly piss.

Victor looked like a chicken instead of a parrot on this evening. He jerked along like a scrawny chicken on little chicken legs. His neck seemed to rest on a spring that

made his head bob and weave like a chicken's. The cigarette in his mouth pecked the air like a chicken beak. Max hated chickens. He didn't hate Victor, but he was mad at him for looking like a chicken. When Victor strutted like a barnyard pecking, worm eating, pellet shitting fowl, Max got mad. Chickens had bones in their useless bodies, and some of those bones were tiny, and sharp. A chicken bone killed Jack Robinson.

Chapter Nine

Yes, a chicken bone killed Jack Robinson. Actually, the bone was greatly aided by an Army officer named Terence Schoultz. All Max could remember about Schoultz was what an Army scout told him two days after the incident. Schoultz had been drinking scotch at the Officer's club in Phu Bai until late in the evening. Bored with the Motown music on an old jukebox, he rose from his stool, climbed in his jeep, and maneuvered the vehicle north on Highway 1 toward Hue. Max imagined the headlights strafing the darkness, the transistor radio blaring big band music, the M-16 resting, without a magazine, in the opposite seat beneath a case of Stroh's beer.

What Schoultz probably wanted was to find some little gook whore on the roadside and get a blowjob before bedtime. Max remembered that night being so clear you could almost see through the stars. Schoultz must have been a stupid man. The officer worked in supply and had never fired his weapon, according to the Army scout who gave Max the info. He drove up Highway 1 without the slightest bit of knowledge or concern that the area around Max's compound became a literal shooting gallery after dark.

Sometimes the Vietcong threw tree limbs across the road, forcing vehicles to stop and the drivers to drag debris off the asphalt. Many Americans had been killed holding tree limbs when the Cong detonated American made Claymore mines purchased from a cousin in the South Vietnamese Army. The thought that 750 ball bearings hurled by the blast of two pounds of C-4 might rip off his arms, sever his head, or tear out his lungs, never crossed the drunken officer's mind. To Max this was a strong indication of stupidity.

Occasionally, a company of North Vietnamese regulars slid, snake-like, through the tree line that ran parallel to Highway 1 between Phu Bai and Hue. They usually moved North, hoping to ambush the 9th Marines somewhere in I Corps area. When they stopped for a handful of rice or a piss, the little bastards derived great pleasure from sniping at passing jeeps and trucks. On quiet evenings Max often heard their giggles harmonize with the frightened squeals of parrots and macaws. Even American Huey pilots strafed this section of road with 30mm. fire indiscriminately after the sun sank. This military intelligence must have escaped the supply officer Terrence Schoultz as he laughed and farted his way home through the black night.

No one in Max's CAG unit, including Jack Robinson, should have ever known Schoultz even existed, but war did funny things to time and space. The CAG compound sprawled across Highway 1 in the middle of the village of Gia Lin. It was about a half mile from the huge Army base camp to the west and about a mile south of Hue city. When Max joined the volunteer group from his base outfit, I Corps Command in DaNang told him that the letters simply stood for Combined Action Group, which was a loose coalition of rice farmers and Marines. He was told that the idea originated during the Revolutionary War when groups of patriots, trained by regular soldiers, defended their homes from the invading British hordes. He was told it was a great idea. What he forgot in all the telling was that he was the invading British horde. Max learned quickly that the Vietnamese militia, while hating the Vietcong, found it equally hard to embrace an ugly foreign soldier, white or black, who paid their children ten piasters for sex and who laughed when shooting their water buffalo.

Nevertheless, it wasn't bad duty, dangerous but not bad. When your strike force

consisted of twelve marines and twenty reluctant Vietnamese, no one asked you to take part in big operations in the bush, or ride shotgun on sitting duck truck convoys. Instead, the unit ran regular patrols in the village, kept their ears open for useful information, and did public relations work, which amounted to handing out Crest toothpaste and *Chu Hoi* pamphlets. Their casualty rates were low. Their commanding officer's expectations were lower. His name was Captain Tom Phillips. He had red hair, freckles and pasty skin, which made him look exactly like the puppet on Max's favorite childhood TV show *Howdy Doody*. As a matter of fact, that was what everyone called him behind his back. Phillips sent orders to four CAG groups like the one in Gia Lin from the safety of his concrete bunker in Phu bai. As long as Max's unit produced a few yellow bodies every three or four weeks for press conferences, Phillips let them alone. His warriors only saw him when they came back to the rear area for supplies.

The village of Gia Lin itself was blessed with a decent barber, three disease free whores, and a neighborhood bar owned by a grizzled village elder who distilled an orange liquid somehow from rice. Max usually bought two pints of the liquid every day. One he drank. The other fueled his kerosene lamp. The twelve Americans chipped in a few dollars of military script each month and paid the mayor's wife to cook one hot meal every day in their makeshift mess tent. The arrangement eliminated the problem of stray dogs and made the mayor's daughter available for doing laundry. Unfortunately, Max remembered clearly, the luxury of home cooking in a combat zone could also make a man learn to hate chickens.

As Schoultz's jeep drove past the CAG sentry post in the village marketplace, Ron Johnson, Mac Barnett, Jack Robinson, and Max finished chewing the last of seven

scrawny chickens bought from and cooked by the illustrious mayor's wife. Freddie Thomas pushed through the screen door of the mess tent.

"Why aren't you at your post asshole?" asked Jack, who was Max's squad leader and, by virtue of seniority, also the CAG leader.

"You ain't gonna believe this. You just ain't gonna fucking believe it."

"Believe what?" Max chimed in with a mouthful of chicken.

"Some frigging Army officer, drunk on his ass, just drove through the marketplace. Yelled at me that he had to get back to that country club base of theirs just outta our TAOR. I yelled back 'the roads unsecure fucker'. He tells me that he's gonna fuck my momma and keeps driving."

Mac Barnett lit a Pall Mall from one of those complimentary packs of four cigarettes that come in boxes of C-rations and laughed. When he spoke, the smoke from his mouth punctuated the first few words.

"Hell boys, we got a double blessing. The Lord God of Holy Hosts is giving us good American Catholic boys communion." Barnett raised his right arm and flailed the air in a crosshatched pattern, chanting as he did, "Inthenameofthefather andoftheson andoftheholyghost - IbetIcan beatyou atdominooooes." The rest of them laughed and snorted. "Some gook sniper will off this guy's ass within the next five minutes and poof, one less officer to fuck with the enlisted. Plus, the Army will run a fancy ass operation through here with tanks and Hueys looking for that one little sniper and we won't have to go out on patrol. We can kick back, smoke dope, and drink Nguyen's homemade rice piss for a week. A double blessing in the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost of some officer."

“Hey stupid, a third of this country’s catholic,” shouted Ron.

“Well then, it’s a gook blessing too.”

“Alright, enough bullshit. Get back on watch Freddie,” said Jack Robinson. “Max, roust the rest of first squad. We’ve got patrol tonight anyway and we’re going to have a mess to clean up shortly.”

“Can I finish my chicken?”

“Sure, maybe that Army asshole will skate through without a scratch. Hey, is that a wishbone I see in your hand?”

“You mean this thing?” Max shredded the last bit of stringy chicken from the small Y shaped breastbone.

“Don’t break it.”

“What do mean, don’t break it?”

“When I was a kid, my grandmother taught me that, if I pulled this bone apart with another person, whoever got the long half would receive a free wish and the wish would come true.”

“And you believe that crap after all you’ve seen happen over here?” For some reason Max had found the idea that the man who held his life in the balance minute by minute every day should rely on superstition a little unnerving. Then, he remembered how his own father had once stopped the car on the way to Max’s Little League all-star game. A black cat had run in front of them. His dad backed the car almost a mile down a gravel lane and then drove six miles out of the way to avoid crossing the cat’s path. He trusted his dad at twelve. Why not trust his squad leader at twenty?

“I didn’t want to be superstitious and I wasn’t, until the Rhonda Dixon incident.

She was a cheerleader with blonde hair and perfect tits. Me, I was a frigging saxophone player in the High School Marching Band, or the White Squirrels as we were known.”

“In other words, you had no shot at all with perfect Rhonda, especially with a pussy name like *White Squirrel*.”

“Exactly. Then grandma fixed fried chicken for my graduation dinner. Me and my sister pulled the wishbone. I got the bigger half and I wished for just one orgasm with Rhonda. To make sure, I ate the bone. I wanted all the good mojo I could get.”

“You ate it? What if you got choked on it.”

“It’s a small, soft bone. Besides, the risk was worth it.”

“Sometimes just the risk itself is worth the effort, even without any luck.”

“No, you’re wrong, the risk brings the luck and if you don’t die, the rush is outstanding.”

“Was it worth it for you and old Rhonda?”

“We had a senior keg party two nights after I ate that big half of the wishbone. Rhonda was there, drunk on her ass. I was wearing Todd Jones’ football jersey. Todd being the hero of the White Squirrels, Rhonda sees that jersey and, without even looking at my face, gives me my first and probably best blow job I ever had.”

Max and Jack pulled the bone apart. Jack smiled. The longer gray piece floated like driftwood in his palm. A single burst from an AK-47 interrupted the ritual. They ran into a sandbagged hole in the ground that was covered with tin and more sandbags, the command bunker. A PRC-25 radio crackled and popped.

- *TANGO TWO CHARLIE, TANGO TWO CHARLIE. THIS IS CHARLIE ONE
ACTUAL. DO YOU COPY? OVER.* -

From the safety of the Phu Bai CAG Command, Howdy Doody ordered first squad to retrieve an Army jeep that had just been ambushed in their Tactical Area Of Responsibility. According to the CO, the driver, a Captain Terrence Schoultz, managed to desert the jeep and run back to his base camp. There he was shot and killed by sentries because he had forgotten the password. Now the jeep was a liability because the Vietcong could steal it and trade it back to the South Vietnamese Army for American made mines and weapons. Jack never bothered telling the CO that first squad was already on top of the situation, and by the time the transmission was ended, Max had maneuvered most of the Marines and Nhia Quins into a staggered line at the front gate. They were ready to move through the village and retrieve the jeep.

It had rained most of the day, but by sundown, the rain had stopped. The jungle around the compound smelled new, alive, clean. For a few seconds, as the patrol slipped into darkness out past the concertina wire, Max was surrounded by serenity. He forgot where he was and thought only of where he wanted to be. He felt euphoric, as if the air he breathed was filtered through some cosmic water pipe filled with good black hash. Something rustled slightly in an animal pen on his left side. In one fluid motion, Max flicked the selector switch on his M-16 to full automatic and whirled to meet the sound. A water buffalo grunted and found salvation in the sound of its exhaled breath. The relief Max felt could only be understood by other point men. Any illusion Max had about controlling his own destiny existed only on point, where he made the first and irrevocable decision to engage the enemy.

The squad moved north into the marketplace, a mime troupe with black shadow makeup. Each member followed the slow motion contortions of the man in front of him.

Tri, the Vietnamese interpreter with missing front teeth, lifted his leg and lowered his foot gently into the spot Max's vacated. The rationale was simple. If the point man lived to take another step, the space he stepped out of was safe. Max always believed the mimicry connected his squad members emotionally as well. Walking in someone else's footsteps gave the group a collective security, like linking a chain or braiding a rope.

Following Tri at one-meter intervals were Jack, Ron, with the radio, and two Vietnamese cousins named Nguyen and Phuc. Mac Barnett humped the heavy M-60 machine gun. The Navy corpsman, Rick Santos and his trainee Vo Giap trailed him. The tail-end Charlie was a tall, lean, black shadow with dead eyes. Flea Chavis had already served one tour and had now survived most of another one. He handled an M-79 grenade launcher like it was a conductor's baton and could orchestrate a symphony of destruction in a few seconds. Max was thankful that some hard-nosed judge in Detroit gave Flea a choice between the second tour and jail because his abilities had bailed the squad out of several tight spots. Max never fully trusted the man's dull eyes, but felt safe enough for the moment that their cold stare was directed at the mutual enemy. Six other Marines and twenty Vietnamese waited in reserve at the compound.

Kneeling in the shadows of the barber's thatched hut, Max raised his right fist. Tri's went up immediately. The signal ran down the line and the squad fell to their knees like a row of dominoes toppling. Looking through the pale moonlight into the marketplace, the thought had come to Max that death was not the worst fear. It never woke him at night or bothered his appetite. He drank rice wine and smoked Thai sticks because the result made him giggle, not because it gave him courage. He carried no rabbit's foot in his pocket, no worry stones in his hand, no cross around his neck. Max

kept the idea of death shrouded in the fog of disappointment. He didn't want his corpse in a casket to shatter his parents' expectations. They looked so guilty at the airport saying goodbye, as if they had somehow failed to teach him that immortality was reserved for gods, not teenagers. He never once feared that instant when the conscious shuts off light a light switch, but was terrified of what that instant might mean for them.

Looking back, he wondered if that slight distinction in his perception made him careless. When the box-like outline of the abandoned jeep caught his eye about twenty meters in front of the squad's position, he stood and moved forward into the full light of the moon. The asphalt on Highway 1 appeared wet beneath his feet in the brightness. He could distinguish the intricate carvings above the entrance to the Buddhist temple on his left, the way the craftsman's tools had dipped and dived in concentric circles to scar the wood with mystical and silent incantations, the way the artist's brush, had delicately coaxed the dull gray designs into living red and gold. Suddenly, exhaustion overwhelmed him with the thought that so much beauty could co-exist with so much ugliness. He wanted to get the jeep back to the compound and go to sleep.

There was a strange, gasping sound behind Max, like water being sucked down the drain. The noise hesitated, and then repeated several times. Jack rocked back and forth on one knee. His arms flailed the air, and then his hands grasped his own throat. He dangled momentarily between life and death. A marionette with no string, Jack Robinson fell through the night and hit the ground with a dull thud.

At that instant, Max detected panic. Ron Johnson was positioned between Jack and a water well. The radioman could see very little in the shadows of the houses. The gurgling noises must have driven him to the very edge of sanity. Maybe he thought some

Cong had slipped up on Jack and slit his throat. Maybe he thought snakebite, heart attack, smallpox, or black syphilis. Maybe he believed whatever got Jack was contagious. All Max could think was that Johnson's fear forced his hands into a single stupid act. Before Max reached him, Ron smacked a pop up flare against the ground. The white ball of phosphorus shot skyward from its aluminum tube. Reaching an altitude of a hundred feet, a small parachute opened, and the blaze began to drift downward. With the flare swinging back and forth on strings, the marketplace was suddenly transformed into a huge strobe-lit dance floor. The whole squad moved in stiff, slow motion twitches, fully exposed to enemy rifle fire.

There was none. Whoever shot at the Army Captain was long gone. By the time Max reached Jack's body, Rick Santos had already knelt beside it and laid his fingers across the squad leader's neck searching frantically for a pulse. Max had no idea what had happened, but he knew Jack was dead. He fought the fear that surrounded them all. It wasn't the fear of death, but of not knowing how it arrived. He and Rick grabbed the body from the ground, ran to the jeep, and threw it across the hood. Mac Barnett, close by, slammed the gearshift into neutral and got behind it with Ron Johnson. They began to push. Flea Chavis sent up another flare, while the Vietnamese soldiers stayed under cover.

"Either one of you dumb fuckers check for keys," whispered Flea.

The keys were still in the ignition and the engine started. The whole squad piled into or onto the jeep and Barnett steered them back to the compound before the second flare hit the ground. Max saw Freddie running across the road, pulling the gate open. When the jeep rolled to a stop in front of the mess tent, Max checked his watch. Sixteen

minutes had passed since he led them out on patrol, yet Max felt like he'd been boxing in a sauna room for hours. Chavis and Barnett lifted Jack's body from the jeep, carried it into the mess tent, and tossed it on the table as if it was a sack of feed. The men grunted loudly with the weight.

"Nothing weighs more than a corpse," said Barnett.

"That's because it's dead weight, dumbass," growled Chavis.

Max stared at Jack's frozen death smile in the lantern light and noticed the skin on the face glowed with a bluish tint. His father once told him a story about how the dairyman brought fresh milk to the house during the Depression in big metal cans. Max's grandmother would carry out her pails and order two gallons of *blue john*. The dairyman always ladled the cream off the top and poured skimmed milk into her pails. Without the expensive yellow cream, what was left had a blue-gray color, and all the women around town called it *blue john*. Jack Robinson was missing the ingredient that gave him flavor, richness, taste, and vitality. He had become *blue jack*.

Rick pried the jaws apart and propped a penknife upright between the roof of the mouth and the tongue.

"I think he's choked to death on something and I don't want to lose a finger looking for it."

Reaching into the windpipe, Rick dislodged a long piece of chicken bone.

"What the hell is it?" asked Johnson.

"It's a wishbone, man. He must've been chewing on it and swallowed it."

"Or he was trying to warn Murphy not to stand up and walk out into the mother fucking middle of the marketplace in the moonlight, like a green ass recruit, and choked

on it. Nice going Maxy boy, Jack died trying to save your balls,” said Flea Chavis.

“Fuck you. You don’t know that’s what happened. Besides, he wouldn’t have given away your position by speaking, he was too good a squad leader,” Max shouted.

Rick held the gray bone against the light reverently, as if it were a talisman, and spoke slowly, “He was also a loyal friend and would have died willingly trying to help any of us, especially you Max.”

Ron Johnson picked up the hand mike for the PRC-25 and asked anyone listening,

“How the fuck am I gonna call this in?”

“Booby trap,” answered Barnett. “Oh, and by the way, Robinson had a great collection of *Playboy* mags, which he’ll no longer need. Dibs!”

“Then I’m calling dibs on the baseball cards and the pictures of his sister,” yelled Johnson over the squawking radio.

Chavis stood and grinned. “Well, he’s been hiding four cans of peaches that his mommy sent in her last care package and I’m *taking* those.” He patted the grenade launcher riding on his hip. “Or else, whoever does better not sleep.”

It was night at the racetrack. Max sat in his truck with the door open, smoking. Where had everyone gone? The ball field had been deserted. The horses had been fed and the drunks had gone to sleep. How could an entire population disappear and he not see them leave? Sherry didn’t even say goodbye. Max guessed that meant she wasn’t interested in going out with him. He started his truck, thinking that maybe he finally understood the barter and the banter that went on when Jack Robinson died. Each one of those men respected him in their own way, and a piece of Jack’s property was a piece of

Jack. Besides, hadn't Max himself dug out Jack's hidden bottle of Johnny Walker and drained it, toasting his friend and squad leader. The man had gotten his wish fulfilled. Jack Robinson flew home.

Max drove past the security gate and waved goodbye to the night watchman. The racetrack sprawled open behind him, a vast circle of sand and clay and grass. He needed a shower and several beers before another day began.

Chapter Eleven

The Bridgeview Tavern was located just about a mile and half from Ellis Park. It set slightly off of Highway 41 at the foot of the bridge across the Ohio River that separated Kentucky from Indiana. Drinks were cheap and the crowd was always boisterous, sometimes violent. Sherry even remembered when the owner had the building sided with metal strips two years ago. He just covered over all the windows, so they wouldn't have to be replaced every time some drunk threw a chair or another drunk through one. Every night during the summer race season, the regular gang of hardboots drowned away the monotony of the day, intensifying the loudness and the violence. The Bridgeview was just the place she was looking for. She felt angry, at her dad, at Max, at the world in general, but mostly, at herself.

“Another tequila, Chiquita?” Angel Martinez rose from his chair as he asked the question. Like the five other people sitting with her, Angel was a long time friend. He rode races, but not very well. The only thing that got him a lot of mounts was his naturally light weight. Angel had never weighed over a hundred and ten pounds in his life. Still, Sherry respected his courage. The son-of-a-bitch would get on anything with four legs, no matter how crippled, or how rank, and ride the best race he could. He wasn't afraid to take the inside rail turning for home, or stick and drive up behind a wall of horses on a crippled horse. His face was round and deeply tanned. A long scar ran across his left cheek from below the eye to the bottom of his sideburn. Every time Sherry asked him how he got that scar, Angel just smiled and with his black eyes twinkling said, “a woman like you Chiquita.”

Doc Tandini had joined them on his way home from the track for one drink and

was now half-drunk, showing no signs of slowing down. Barbara Miller, a freelance pony girl that made extra money galloping horses during training hours sat beside Sherry and teased Doc. She and Sherry were frequent barhopping partners. Barb's rough, growling voice and close-cropped hair intimidated any drunken cowboys that saw Sherry as an easy mark. Susie and Ron Jackson rounded out the table. They were a husband and wife training team that had raced these bush league tracks since Sherry was a baby. They were hardboots like her father, Manny. As a matter of fact, Manny Devereoux had apprenticed for the Jackson stable.

“Sure Angel, but make it Cuervo Gold. I don't want any nasty ass bar tequila.”

“You're drinking pretty heavy, sweetie. Boy trouble?” asked Barb.

“Are you kidding? Any man that gets a look at those two, big, beautiful, blue eyes is the one in trouble, not Sherry,” Susie smiled, slightly embarrassed, and drank her beer.

“Any man who gets a look at those two big, beautiful...” Ron started to add his perspective to the conversation, but Susie smacked him playfully, and Ron, being a wise married man, shut up.

“It doesn't have to be boy trouble,” Doc said, “Any of us who've been knocking around these damn little tracks for very long has got plenty to drink about. All that scratching and fighting to make a living, meanwhile the big stables run one expensive horse after another down your throats... it's tough. It gets to you.”

“God damn it, you're a vet. What the hell would you know about trying to compete with big outfits. You just drive around in you're new Cadillac and shoot up lame horses with drugs to keep them going and collect your money,” said Ron, as he lit a cigarette.

“You forgot one thing, asshole.”

“What?”

“When you guys don’t win races, I have a hell of time getting my money.”

Angel came back from the bar, set the tequila and a slice of lime in front of Sherry, and without sitting down, walked over to one of the pool tables. Two other riders and a trainer named Gabe McKay wanted him to join their game of nine ball. Sherry licked the back of her wrist, sprinkled salt on it, licked the salt off, drained the shot glass, and stuck the lime slice between her teeth. She loved the taste of tequila and the quick buzz it gave you. Tuning out the mindless hum of her friends’ voices, She looked at the various dead deer and fish mounted on the wall above the pool tables. Wouldn’t it be nice if she could stuff and mount men in the same fashion? They could just hang there, looking stupid. She could be in their company whenever she wanted and always on her own terms.

Take Max, for example. Sherry was intrigued by Max and thought she sensed a reciprocal feeling. Then, today after the game, Max had a talk with Manny. She knew they must have been talking about her. What else could they talk about that would upset Max and he must have been bothered because he just sat there staring into space when Manny left. And what the hell was Manny doing talking about her anyway? She was an adult, damn it. She didn’t need him sticking his nose into her business. Men were fucked up. Max was fucked up. She had really wanted to go out drinking with him after the game. Of course, that would be the problem if all men were stuffed and wall-mounted, a girl could have a hell of time getting any attention. Maybe if they were all fitted with a ring bit for a little extra control...

“A penny for your thoughts.”

Sherry turned around and Max stood over her with a smile in his eyes and a fish bowl of draft beer in his hand.

“I missed you after the game and I was just thinking how nice it would be if you showed up.”

“And I was just thinking, how nice it would be to find you here when I did show up.”

He pulled out the chair Angel had vacated and sat next to Sherry, nodding at the other familiar faces. She started to feel a little nervous. This was a completely different person than the one she left in a semi-trance at the ball field. Sherry had no idea what went on inside his brain. Riding a roller coaster or a rogue horse caused her less distress than sitting next to this lean, intense man. On the other hand, those things also generated considerably less excitement.

“I thought you forgot about me after the game. You and my dad were involved in such a serious conversation.”

“It was far less serious than it looked. He just wanted to know if Storm Strike was training as good as he looked like he was.”

“Yeah, how is that big beast? It looked to me like you had your hands full keeping him from running off this morning,” said Ron.

“Nosy, aren’t you?” Susie spoke before Max could answer.

“Well, I might want to bet on him in the Governor’s on Saturday. It doesn’t look like any other horse in the race can run with him when he’s right.”

“Native Son can,” Doc said.

“Manny told me Native Son had a bad chip in his left knee.” Ron blew smoke rings and waited for Doc’s answer.

“That’s a long way from his heart and his heart’s as big as this room. If he’s halfway sound at all, he’ll give Storm Strike a run for the money. Right, Sherry?”

“He *is* a tough old stud, Doc. But I wish my dad would think about retiring him. The old boy just hasn’t got too many races left in him. I think he’s the only horse on the program that can give Max’s horse any competition on Saturday, but I sure hope he holds together.”

“They’re both good runners,” said Max diplomatically.

And on the conversation went until it diffused into an even drone in Sherry’s mind. The words were undistinguishable from the blue cigarette smoke in the air and the clatter of billiard balls. With each shot of tequila, Max’s presence beside her became more urgent and more formidable until he almost filled the room, melting everyone else into his energy. What was she doing? How many times did she have to go down this road before the right man was waiting at the end? Was there such a thing as the *right man*? Was Max someone who could satisfy more than desire, fill some vague hunger she couldn’t even name for more than a day? Did a single person exist in the whole universe that could bring her mind and heart the one thing they never had, a balanced co-existence. She struggled to restrain her thinking as if it was a runaway horse. Every time her mind wore down and spit the bit, Max said something or did something that spooked it and, picking up the bit, off it ran. Sherry felt him scoot his chair closer and lean into her ear.

“Besides the fact that you grew up around horses and riders, I don’t know anything else about you.”

“Are you sure that’s all you know?”

“Well, no I guess not. You’re beautiful and strong and intelligent.”

“Why Max, I bet you say that to all the fillies you want to get on.”

They both laughed. Sherry laid her hand across Max’s forearm. She felt the warmth rise up through her wrist. It made her shudder.

“You cold?” They’ve got the damn air-conditioner turned down to zero in here.”

“I guess the cold air keeps the drunks from getting sick. Why do you want to know about me? I’ve seen that little redheaded girl that sales Racing Forms following you around like a puppy dog. Are you trying to build a stable, Max?”

“You’ve got me all wrong. That girl’s married. We’re just friends.”

Sherry watched Max blush and enjoyed it. She had learned from her first love affair that when men could bullshit women, they would. It was some kind of control thing, part of their nature. She tried to apply what she new about training horses to understanding men. They just couldn’t pass up an opportunity to put one over on a girl. Sherry knew Max was considered hot property by several of the young women on the backside. She was sure that Max had bedded a few of them, although never more than once or twice. She liked him and she wanted him, but not just for one night’s entertainment. There was something inside Max worth keeping. It was best to let him understand right away that she would not be trifled with.

“I doubt it, Max. I grew up with racetrack men. They seem to think with the same part of their brain as a stallion and not necessarily a stallion with a lot of class.”

“My dad always said us Murphy men had a lot of class. But he said it was all low.” Max smiled at Sherry and she noticed a flash of light in his eyes, like quicksilver.

Ron interrupted to ask Max a question, "Hey, Susie and I have a young horse that won't change leads. We can't get him to go his right lead at all when he rounds the turn and moves into the stretch. Hell, by the eighth pole he's flattened out so bad the whole field runs past him."

"Is he hurting anywhere on the right side?"

"He ain't hurting anywhere except my pocketbook. We've had the Doc here x-ray everything. We've had the blacksmith test his hooves. I even had an acupuncturist treat him two weeks ago."

"That was a goddamn waste of money," said Doc Tandini. "Why don't you just get a voodoo priest to jump around in his goddamn stall?"

"Acupuncture works on humans, why won't it work on horses?" asked Barb.

"Because horses aren't human. They're creatures of emotion, not brains," Doc said, and waved his empty glass at a surly looking waitress who tossed her head and turned away.

"How does that make them different than humans?" Barb pointed her finger at Doc as she spoke. "Besides, you're drunk."

"Hey, I'm asking a good rider about a serious problem." Ron slammed his glass down. "Shut up and give him a chance to answer. What about it, Max?"

"If you're sure the horse isn't sore, you might try getting him out early before the track opens and galloping him the wrong way around the track. Put him right up against the outside rail. When he comes into the turns, he'll have to go to his right lead or go through the fence. Just take it slow and do it several times. He'll figure out what you want and then turn him around."

“Boy, you’re a genius. I knew I was asking the right rider.”

The drinkers were wearing down. Sherry wanted to leave the bar with Max, but she didn’t want to seem too easy. Through the course of the evening, she’d given him plenty of opportunities to ask, but he kept the conversation on a shallow, almost silly level. Time was running out.

“Sherry, I’m not real slick with women.”

“That’s a pretty slick line right there, Max. Just say what’s on your mind. We don’t have to go through a lot of stuff to get where we’re going.”

“No, we don’t. I’d really like to take you out of here and I’d really like to spend some time alone with you.”

“You could have gotten that done an hour ago.”

Chapter Eleven

The night was so clear, Max could almost see through the stars. He wanted Sherry alone with him and he wanted the world quiet. Having driven her to a small beach on the cut bank of the Ohio River, Max accomplished both his desires. Now, he didn't know what he should do. The water flowed beneath him softly and the splash of the current playing off the different sized stones along the shoreline sounded like xylophones tinkling through some jazz song, writing the melody new with each thrust of forward motion. If he could just lay on the blanket with Sherry, keep looking at the stars, sip his beer, and not remember anything, the world would be forever in his control. Then a whiff of fish rotting and summer souring the river mixed with the scent of honeysuckle and green hay around them. His sense of smell became an open conduit between where he was and where he had already been.

The last girl Max cared anything about had left him quickly and painfully wounded, not like the shrapnel and bullet wounds he received in Vietnam. Those tore his flesh from the outside in. Rachel injured him from the inside out. His thoughts drifted toward women he had slept with since Rachel, the whore in Okinawa who whispered Rachel's name for an extra dollar when he climaxed, the two sisters in upstate New York where he had gone to break horses right after the war, the Catholic married woman during Mardi Gras who let him do anything but screw her because she refused to be unfaithful to her husband. There were others too, but he could barely remember faces let alone names. Sex was like shaking hands, just a way to say hello. He thanked his generation for that part of the revolution. As far as sex, Max had always been a hippie.

Being with someone didn't make you part of someone though. When Max left

these other women, he left them entirely. They were shadows with human forms in a fog. They were meaningless except as receptacles for his physical needs. He felt guilty all the time because of that, and yet, couldn't stop himself from repeating his actions at every opportunity. The distance between being with someone and being part of someone was a buffer zone that allowed Max to function without pain. He knew it and he needed it. Now there was confusion swirling beneath this buffer zone in his mind. Like an undertow in the river he sat watching, it pulled and tugged him in a dangerous direction. Here was a woman he very much wanted to be inside of, but also one he wanted inside of him. He felt her warmth, not just next to him on the blanket, but all the way through his body.

“Aren't the stars great Max? It's like there's a whole world up there that exists just for us to look at and wonder about”

“I like them because they hang on nothing in a vacuum. They depend on the law of physics and the law of physics never changes. Stars don't have to think about those little unexpected occurrences that define humans because there aren't any unexpected occurrences in space.”

“What about all those things we studied in high school science class, black holes, super novas...”

Max rolled over on his stomach and looked at Sherry. His eyes were laughing and she was suddenly nervous. Gazing across the river, they both saw a tugboat push five barges full of coal into the narrow channel.

“You must take a lot of pleasure in destroying my last remaining romantic illusion. But I've got an answer, suppose all those things you just mentioned weren't surprises. Suppose they happened in harmony with the life and death of each star and

everything in the universe moved along exactly like it should with the exception of the things people interfered with on this planet? ”

“I never would have figured you to spend time thinking about all this stuff.”

“It used to be what I thought about all the time, how things worked, why they worked that way, how beautiful it was to be part of some higher purpose even if I didn’t know what that purpose was.”

“I’m glad to finally be talking with a man whose brain is above his waist.”

They laughed and Max took two lit cigarettes, handing one to her. Sherry smacked a mosquito from her shoulder. Max leaned over and kissed her forearm gently. The move astonished him, not because he didn’t expect some sexual action on his part, and she seemed to be waiting for it. But the kiss was so gentle; it was as if he used someone else’s lips. He wanted to be exciting, not comforting. Yet he found himself not so much hoping to possess this girl as to touch her inside and out. Sherry leaned closer and didn’t take her arm away from him. Her skin was electric against his cheek.

“My mind used to work pretty well, I think, but not so much now. Now I just feel numb most of the time, like the dentist had given my brain a big shot of Novocain by mistake.”

“You’re not inspiring much confidence in me for a romantic fellow.”

“I’m trying to be honest. I like you and you deserve to know where I’m at, although sometimes I’m not so sure of that myself.” Max sat quietly for a long time.

“Say something, anything.”

Max didn’t speak. He reached out with his right hand and touched her left breast through her tee shirt tentatively as if it were the most valuable and fragile work of art

he'd ever seen. The uncertainty and slight prodding of his conscience disappeared with that touch in one red rush of blood from his brain to some small area below his waist. Max thought of the area as his love meter and suddenly, he was in love. All processes involved in reasoning drifted away with a slight rustling in his mind, like leaves blowing across a shingled roof. If this was a mistake, then Max was the kind of man who wanted to learn from his mistakes.

“Does that bother you?”

“No, it feels good.” Sherry kissed him hard and pushed her body down on his. They kept kissing. Max ran his hand under her shirt and caressed the nipple with his fingers. She began to breath heavily, then suddenly pulled away.

“I'm on the pill, but I don't know you Max. I haven't had much luck with men.”

Her upper lip quivered slightly and Max knew she was fighting herself. He loved having that kind of power. She was afraid and he knew the fear was making her more excited. Brushing a lock of auburn hair aside, Max ran his tongue up and down her long, soft neck. He watched her eyes glaze over slightly, then close. He kissed her again. Sherry fell back on the ground. He lifted her shirt and kissed her flat, smooth stomach. This is the most perfect navel that ever existed, thought Max as he unbuckled her Levis and slowly pulled the zipper down. She no longer held back, moving her hips under the urging of his fingers. Max felt her control and his begin to fade...

As quickly as it started for Max, it was over. His reasoning and thought returned. He went limp and the desire to be *with* a woman folded into a small box somewhere beneath his consciousness. He could no longer perform and was therefore, less than a man. Admittedly, he had been less than a man on several occasions since the war, but it

had only overwhelmed him with fear and guilt like it did this time once before. He wanted to take this woman, but if he let his guard down that much he felt like he might die. Now it was over without being finished and, as Max lay on the blanket with his eyes closed, Sherry's long hair tumbled over his face and across his mouth. The smell of cigarette smoke and herbal shampoo began to suffocate him. He wanted a shot of Jim Beam, a line of coke, electro shock therapy, quick death, anything but having another person next to him relying on him for some type of emotional activity. Max wasn't scared of much, but he was terrified of letting himself be closed in and the weight of another body lying on him was more than he could bear.

He was the smallest man in third platoon and still could barely squeeze through the narrow opening. The tunnel ran at a downward angle for about ten feet, and then leveled off into a passageway that was so tight Max's shoulders scraped the dirt from both walls as he wriggled forward. The air stank of rotted plants and the flesh of dead animals. The further he crawled, the more terrified he got. He had only been in 'Nam for three weeks and never asked for this job. It was so dark and silent that Max felt isolated from anything real. He inched through a vacuum with no way out. After what seemed like hours, but was in fact only a few minutes, the passage widened. He found himself in a small underground room. Not wanting to risk becoming a target, he kept his flashlight shut off and ran his arms along the walls to measure the room's dimensions. The dirt was packed tight and he touched a log running vertically up the wall. Following the rough bark surface, he rose on one knee, then stood halfway up. His hand hit the ceiling and another log running horizontal to the floor. The room was shored up well. Max knew that

this was just the kind of bunker that Charlie might stash a whole shitload of weapons in. It was buried far enough underground that an air strike wouldn't even rattle the walls.

Dropping back into a prone position and scurrying along the floor like a soft-shelled crab, he felt for any wooden crates or metal objects. After moving a few feet in the blackness, he bumped against a wooden leg. It could have been a cot or a table. Max wasn't sure. The fact that something, anything had gotten stored in the tunnel was reason enough to blow it. He would tell Lt. Carlson, the platoon commander to load the entrance with satchel charges when he got out. The dead silence gave Max enough confidence that he risked a quick look around with his flashlight. The room surely had to be empty. Even the quietest Viet Cong in the world had to take an occasional breath.

The single beam shot from the flashlight and spread across the wall in a dim circle. The room was smaller than he'd thought. There was barely enough area to turn around and crawl out. As he twisted his body to the right, Max stumbled over the wooden leg behind him and fell into something warm and soft. The wooden leg belonged to a cot. The cot tipped over as Max tumbled across to the other side. A lifeless body rolled off the cot and onto Max. The cot jammed crossways pinning him against the wall with the corpse. He started to scream, but couldn't. Pushing and kicking frantically, he scooted backward, but bumped against another wall. The thing wouldn't get away from him. The more he kicked and squirmed, the more it stuck to him.

Exhausted, Max laid perfectly still and tried to think. Where was he? Did the tunnel cause this body as a mindfuck or was it real? The flashlight glowed in his hand and his hand was trapped between his chest and the weight on it. The weight was certainly real. When he got the light free, a dead face came into view. It belonged to a

young Vietnamese woman in black pajamas. Her eyes were open and rolled back slightly as if she were trying to see the small, dark hole in the center of her forehead that killed her. Max knew she hadn't been there very long because she was fairly warm and the smell of death had not covered her yet. She still had the scent of a woman. Either her friends had dragged her back from the firefight with the 9th Marines twenty minutes ago and left her till they found a way to bury her, or she had pissed off the leader of their cadre and had been executed.

The longer Max lay quiet, the more he noticed how attractive she had been. Her thin lips, black eyes, and what seemed to him like French features must have gotten quite a few stares on the streets of her village before she decided to be a hero. He imagined a whole life for her without war. She could have been an actress or a musician, maybe a student. He might have met her in a bar and bought her a drink, met her mother – “Chow bach, main yoi com.” Her warm breasts pressed against him. Her thighs rested on the inside of his. He was getting a hard on. Goddamn. What a sick bastard. He was losing his mind and with it, control of his body. He started moving again. Kicking the cot hard several times, he felt a small section of the opposite wall give way. Everything twisted again and Max slid from underneath the corpse. He found the opening out of the room and ran on his hands and knees back to the surface. As his head popped above ground, two Marines grabbed him beneath his arms and lifted him free. Max told Carlson that the tunnel was empty, but useful for storing small arms, and they blew it to pieces.

He transferred from the infantry to the Combined Action Group in Gia Lin a week later, but he carried the woman with him. She became a constant reminder of how close he had come to being less than human and how important it was to never let his desires

totally free.

The Kentucky night sky collapsed around him and, like a spent squeezebox, his lungs ran out of air. The more he tried to breathe, the more Sherry's soft moan in his ear began to sound like fingernails scraping a blackboard. The more she tucked him into her with those wonderful arms, the more his skin burned as if a million insects bit him relentlessly. He bolted upright. Bugs *were* biting.

"Mosquitoes," Max screamed, "Head for the truck."

Chapter Twelve

He's a psycho thought Sherry. She'd just been making out with a psycho.

Watching him run to the truck, she couldn't help notice that Max was a psycho with a great ass. His ass made her laugh. It was a nervous laugh though. She remained very unsure about what had just happened and what it meant. Sherry couldn't remember a time since the eighth grade when Johnny Morton filled his pants with semen that a boy or a man had quit on her in the middle of something this intense. Max hadn't gotten off early. She would have felt that. He just quit being interested. The damndest thing though, it didn't feel as if the disinterest was in her as a person. The man just stopped wanting sex. Not that she'd have gone all the way, but it would have been nice to say no. It would have given her control. Maybe he was queer. Oh god, were her instincts *that* bad? No way. He liked women. He liked them a lot and she believed he liked her. Maybe he got wounded in the war and couldn't...no, the red-headed Racing Form Girl. Even if Max said he hadn't had her, the girl bragged for a week after the Fourth of July party about what a stud he was. Sherry felt him get hard and then nothing, as if an electric current shut off somewhere in his mind...not his body... his mind.

She ran behind him flailing the air to ward off mosquitoes and opened the truck door. He slipped his shirt over his head as she climbed in. An intricate tattoo high on his right shoulder, three swords crossed and wet with blood danced in the dash light.

"I never saw that before."

"What?"

"That tattoo. What's it mean? Where'd you get it?"

She saw the sadness come into his eyes. This story must have a bad ending, she

thought. The question should have been saved for another time. Regardless of the real world thrust upon her and the illusions that the world had crushed, Sherry clung to the childhood notion that every good story deserves a good ending. For that reason, it was best to be careful about asking too many private questions. Still, the gentle and sincere tone of Max's voice even now made her want to know the answer. The wave of panic from moments before had subsided. She wanted to understand who Max Murphy really was and why, no matter if that point wasn't exactly clear to him.

"Okinawa. I got the tattoo in Okinawa with my two closest friends, Jack Robinson and Rick Santos. It was August, 1967 and we were on the way to 'Nam."

"Why did you stop on Okinawa?"

"There's a big military presence there and the Marine Corps uses it for a staging area. It's like the locker room before the football game. You get on your equipment and some idiot gives you your last pep talk and out you go into the jungles of Vietnam."

"Or like the jock's room right before the daily double."

"Same difference."

Max started the truck, backed around a willow tree, and headed for Henderson, Kentucky on the gravel road that led away from the river. Sherry reached into a small cooler in the seat and pulled out a can of beer.

"You want one?"

"No thanks. Anyway, here we were on this island, Rick, Jack, and me, after twelve weeks of serious training, about ready to get killed..."

"Oh God!"

"What's wrong?"

“I’ve got to pee and I mean right now.”

Max braked the truck quickly and it slid on the gravel with the roar of a waterfall in the quiet night. The deserted stretch of road split the tree line along the river and a soybean field. The moon looked like a giant white grape and it made her smile. Her whole body seemed to melt into its own center. She was limp and very happy for the first time in a long time. Sometimes after sex, even unfinished sex, she felt relaxed and comfortable with life for a few hours and then the tension that came with being alive and being a woman in a world of men returned. She hoped the good feeling would last longer this time, but even as she walked to the back of the truck in search of a little privacy it began to slip away.

Her reaction was always the same. She squatted to pee on a small patch of ferns a few yards from the truck. Every time she tried to fall in love with someone she might also like, the result was disastrous. All she wanted now was a quick escape. Oh, Max had good hands. He wasn’t rough. He had certainly lived more in his few years than most of the semi-intelligent backstretch hardboots she knew and he seemed sensitive to her needs, well, other than her sexual needs. At the same time, the more she learned about Max the more she wondered if either one of them possessed the stamina for a romantic involvement. The man spent too much time lost inside his own head. Could he ever share what was inside her without hurting them both in the long run? Maybe the best thing to do now was keep the memory of this one fun evening in her mind, cut her losses, and run. Her dad had always taught her the uselessness of whipping a dead horse. If an animal is worn out, exhausted, no matter how hard you beat it with a whip, it won’t run. Sherry had a built in shit detector and the buzzer was ringing behind both ears. Anything further past

this night would soon turn to shit. She stood, realizing there was no Kleenex to wipe herself, and zipped her jeans. It was always the same, she thought while walking slowly back to the truck. You can't make love with people you like. Always the same.

As soon as Sherry shut the door, Max wouldn't shut up. He was like a child who finally understood something new about himself. His mouth became an artesian well of words while Sherry stared into the blank night, lighting one cigarette after another, drifting into the confusion of smoke and stars and beer and sweat and sex and no sex and love and hate and horsehair and runaway mothers and inadequate fathers and Max...

"Anyway, like I said, the three of us, Jack Rick, and me snuck under the gate at Camp Hansen the night before we flew to DaNang and went to a place called the *Happy Hotel*. Can you believe that? The only thing happy in that place was the mama san collecting five bucks American for each who popped his rocks. The girls had rubbers by the gross on a nightstand and the lights in the rooms were a soft blue. I remember that exactly, blue..."

"What's all this got to do with your tattoo?"

"Oh, I'm getting to that. The tattoo shop was just down the street from the whorehouse and you had to walk past three bars to get there."

"It's getting really late, Max. I've got to get some rest before the sun comes up."

"Yeah, I know, but you're the first person who's ever heard this story and I want to tell you everything..."

Chapter Thirteen

Max had left Sherry at Monica's Motel in Henderson and driven to his own room on Southlane Drive before the rest of the story began to seep into his conscious. He hadn't told her everything, not about the wishbone and the choking noises Jack made in the dark, or about Rick and the VC sniper Max wanted to exist, but no one ever saw. Max was there and even he wasn't sure of the whole story. That doubt terrified him every day and kept him awake most nights till his mind was numb enough to put itself to sleep. Taking a bottle of Jim Beam from the dresser, he laid on the bed, turned the TV to an infomercial for Ronco Vegamatic blenders and thought about those events that still made his mind jump from reality to illusion and from memory to possibility without conscious effort. It began when he tried to explain Jack's death to Tri and the other Vietnamese soldiers in the compound.

Of course he spoke in English and fast because he didn't want them understanding what was being said about their country, their mothers, their water buffalo, their betel nut, and their goddamn dog stew. He could get killed easy enough without their help. Max grabbed his neck in a mock strangling motion.

"He choked on a chicken bone, you fucking little assholes."

"*Maxy beaucoup dien cai dau,*" Tri smiled without teeth. The small circle of Vietnamese soldiers giggled, danced, and chanted –*Dien cai dau! Dien cai dau!*

"I am not dinky dow. This war is dinky dow. Your country's dinky dow!"

He yelled so loudly, they stopped moving and stared like frightened children into his eyes. He choked back a strong urge to click the safety off and spray them all with a

burst from his M-16. After Jack's freakish death, Max grew rapidly to the point in his tour of duty where nothing mattered. He could have killed them all without remorse, even though they were supposed to be on his side. Max didn't have a side anymore, only anger and the desire to destroy anything remotely connected with Vietnam.

He didn't know it then but looking back he realized that he had reached the stage in war that the Marine Corps wanted him to reach. There was a period of six or seven months after Marines got over the fear of their first firefight and before they believed the thirteen-month tour would finally end, a period when they operated on nothing but hatred. Their hatred for everything consumed them and unplugged any natural moral restraint. Some responded to the darkness quicker than others, but everyone in combat got there.

Max began entering "the zone", as it was called, the night Jack died and found it full of adrenaline, power, pleasure, and mercilessness, all the things that made him a god and an animal at the same time. Rick Santos kept him human. Without his other friend, it was conceivable to Max that his mind could have devolved into instinct alone, losing all regard for the normal human things he always took for granted. Max met Rick and Jack at about the same time. Rick was actually in the Navy, but he volunteered for corpsman duty, and as a Navy medic, found himself assigned to a front line infantry unit. The three men were thrown together for training and staging back in the world, as they called the States and when Max volunteered for CAG duty, they joined him without question. When Rick pried the chicken bone from Jack's throat, he was eight weeks from rotation. Medic tours lasted only twelve months. Max guessed that the Navy reasoned that any corpsman surviving a year with a Marine Corps unit deserved to come home early.

After Jack's gear had been shipped home, Rick moved into the bunker and Max didn't mind because the company was good. Rick never let the carnage disrupt his focus on Hostess cupcakes and pale women. His face constantly carried a strange, crooked grin, even in sleep, and the grin was contagious. Most of all, Max loved having him around because Rick Santos was blessed with *the luck*. *The luck* covered some guys like a coat of chain mail armor. When you had it, you were invincible. Max never thought he had it personally, but always believed Rick held it up like an open umbrella with room for others underneath. Take the M-20 grenade incident, for example, thought Max as he lit a cigarette, coughed, and swallowed a shot of Jim Beam. He got up slowly and turned the TV off. Lying back on the stiff motel bed, he stared at the blinking light on the smoke alarm. Yeah, put that whole grenade deal into perspective and you could understand this invisible luck thing Rick Santos had.

The M-20 hand grenade had always seemed to be a fairly reliable killing device to Max. He had thrown scores of them in training and in combat. None failed to explode once the spoon sprang off and four seconds passed. On February 22nd, 1968, as Max walked past the market place and turned west down a narrow trail leading across a dike between two rice paddies, the efficiency and infallibility of the M-20 nestled securely in his mind, as securely as the four grenades that nestled in his flack jacket.

The sun reflected off the paddy water in crystals of light. Sweat beaded under his helmet and stung his eyes. The rest of the squad strung out in single file and in various stages of exhaustion and discomfort behind him. Since the Tet Offensive started and Max's unit was only a mile from Hue, the company commander kept them on full alert,

supplying intelligence on NVA troop movement during the day and running small night ambushes against the local Viet Cong at night. Max was thinking that sleep would only come at death and how good either might feel even then when Mac Barnett shouted at him.

“Watch out for spider traps in the tree line.”

He stepped off the paddy dike and up a slight incline, sparsely covered with bamboo shoots, elephant grass, and a few meager rubber trees. If there had been any of the camouflaged holes, Max would have fallen into them and on top of the snipers they held because he was dozing as he walked. He didn't know that was possible until he walked into one of the trees and knocked his helmet off with a clang.

“Jesus, wake up Murphy. You can't get a purple heart for wounds received from a rubber tree,” Rick Santos said, running up and retrieving the rolling helmet.

“There ain't no spider traps in those trees, anyhow The gooks know the Army won't come this far down towards the village and they know we ain't going into that section of jungle with just a squad,” reasoned Ron Johnson.

Max was sure Johnson was a black cat because at the precise moment he closed his mouth two sharp cracks, as if someone had snapped a pencil in half twice, came from the denser foliage beyond the rubber trees. The hollow zings that passed his ear were unmistakable. A single AK-47 had been fired about fifty meters in front of them and whoever fired it was a poor shot. No soldier ever hears the shot that kills him, being long dead before the sound waves catch the bullet. Max felt the squad react like a whip, unrolling and flicking out from behind him into a straight line beside him. Flea was the tip and he was the handle.

“Spider trap,” shouted Rick, and fell into a prone position, head up the slight incline next to Max.

“No shit Sherlock,” shouted Barnett. “But where?”

“Stand up and sweep the tree line.” Max gave the order, knowing that whoever fired the shot had probably ducked beneath the earth and closed it over his head, gone forever in a maze of tunnels. But the squad needed to make the effort. It was their job. The line rose and stepped forward in perfect cadence, firing their rifles on full automatic from the hip, stopping only to change magazines. The jungle came alive, dancing with the rhythm of the lead rounds. Tracers smoked through leaves, trailed by the smell of cordite and phosphorus. The line held firm. No one fell, which meant no one was firing back. Max raised his right fist.

“Cease fire. Cease fire, goddamnit. Johnson move into that cluster of elephant grass and check for spent casings, or blood. The rest of you kneel and stay ready.”

“It’s too thick in there. There could be a whole regiment of NVA waiting for us. I’m tossing a grenade first to clear a path.” Johnson pulled an M-20 from the breast of his flack jacket, yanked the pin out, released the spoon, and lobbed it in front of the whole squad. All this happened before Max could yell, “Not uphill you stupid fucker.”

Johnson’s shoulder caught on the hard edge of the sleeveless jacket. The olive colored ball of C-4 and metal sailed in a high arc and landed twenty meters below the hillcrest. It hesitated, and then tumbled end over end backward, gaining speed with each rotation. Seconds passed that seemed like hours. The wind slowed down so much, Max could see its thick waves in the air. There was screaming and scrambling, but it all sounded like a 45rpm record on a 33rpm turntable to Max. He and Rick stood frozen,

watching their own deaths draw closer. The grenade took one last turn and stopped directly between Rick's feet. There was no sound. Max choked on the silence, as if it was a lake and he was drowning. Flea's voice reached beneath the water line and resurrected him.

"It's a fucking dud, man. A dud."

"You saved my life," said Max and hugged Rick.

"I didn't do anything but stand here."

"Yeah, but you've got the luck. Those grenades are never duds. You've got it. Because of you that thing didn't blow. You've got the luck man. You're home free. I'm sticking to you like glue till you rotate, my man."

"Me too," Mac Barnett lit a Pall Mall and spoke for the rest of the squad, "and you don't have the luck Johnson, you goofy bastard. Stay away from me."

From that day forward, Johnson was not allowed to handle grenades and Max, as well as the rest of the compound, held Rick in awe. He was a mystical shaman and Max sat at his feet waiting for the magic luck to be passed on. Even the villagers heard the story from Tri, and when Max escorted Rick into the market place twice a week to hand out Crest toothpaste and give penicillin shots, a crowd encircled them chanting *Boc-si, Boxy, Boxy*. The word meant healer, but the more Max heard the people shout it out, the more he realized that they were looking for something more than medicine and they thought Rick had it.

Max stared at the luminescent dial on the motel clock radio. 3:30 AM. The air conditioner hummed with the sound of a waterfall. Ordinarily, the soft noise would have

hypnotized him and lulled him to something that laughingly passed for sleep. Tonight every synapse in his brain electrified his whole body. The present rummaged through the past again, almost as if it was searching for something the past had put away in a drawer underneath a bunch of old clothes. It felt like a seizure.

Even the bourbon had no effect. One minute he giggled like a child with the smell of Sherry on his clothes. The next minute, he paced the floor to keep his heart from exploding. His pulse raced and he moved to keep up with it. He was living on stolen time and he knew it. He knew it. When did Rick's luck run out? Maybe no one ever really had any luck. Maybe sometimes good things happened, and sometimes bad things happened, even if you were the luckiest man alive. When would his own luck run out, the luck passed on from Rick? Why was he still alive when the whole world was dead? He scratched at the tattoo on his arm. It itched and he hated it, but it would always be there and he would always know that his solitary sword was all that was left. When had Rick's luck ran out? He had to remember. He couldn't stop himself.

Max reached for the cigarettes. The pack was empty, so he crumpled it into a ball and threw it at the TV. He had another pack on the dresser. Reaching out in the dark, he felt the safety of cellophane, opened the fresh pack, lit one, sat back down on the bed, and saw the white cap from his bottle in the glow of the dying match. He unscrewed the cap and took another drink of Jim Beam. Dylan Thomas died from drinking bourbon. He learned that in the only college literature class he ever took, but Max rarely drank hard liquor unless he desperately need to sleep. Max had no intention of drinking himself to death, but he also knew there were worse ways to die. One line written by Thomas whispered in the dark – *time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the*

sea. When did everything really fall apart in 'Nam? When did he lose that one little spark that made him smile from the inside out, no matter what was on the outside coming in? Six days before Rick's rotation home. That was the exact point in time. Six days.

His squad was scheduled for night ambush, which usually meant nothing more than walking slowly to the playground of the old French schoolhouse, sitting in a semi-circle with their backs against the schoolyard wall, where they waited for sunrise. For the past several weeks though, the NVA resupplied its troops around Hue by the Lua Nam trail that veered close to the school. Max never knew anymore when a platoon of enemy soldiers might end up in their collective lap. The idea made him edgy, or maybe the amphetamines Rick passed out like M&M's to keep them awake for days at a time and the idea together caused his feeling of impending doom.

The men set up around midnight. Max placed Barnett and the M-60 machinegun at the top of the semi-circle. By taking the middle position, the gun could sweep a full thirty meters in either direction, giving it command of the full length of the killing zone. Max loved the way the Marine Corps labeled things. The field of fire that offered the highest possibility of slaughtering an unsuspecting group of humans wasn't a backshooting ambush, a butcher's block, blood alley, or carnage carnival. It was simply a zone, a technical term. Marines were expected to get in the zone and stay there as if they were swinging a hot bat in a high school baseball game. Fanning to the left and right and slightly behind Barnett, Tri, Flea Chavis, and the other squad members slide down into prone firing positions, checked their weapons and waited silently, hidden by the darkness and the tall elephant grass. Max tugged at Johnson's sleeve, pulled him behind Barnett

and sat him down. If they got into a firefight and need to call for support, he wanted to know where the radio was located and to know it was safe. Somewhere between them all and the schoolyard wall, Rick found a spot to wait with his medical gear ready.

The squad had decent cover. They would be unseen by any troops moving over the thin, dirt path directly in front of them. The tree line beyond the path was silent except for a few jungle birds cawing. The moon filtered a pale yellow glow through the clouds. Max began to drift inside his own mind as he slumped over his rifle and lifted the hand mike off of the PRC-25 radio on Johnson's back. By pressing the transmit button twice, the receiver in the compound would click twice and the rest of the unit would know the squad had set the ambush safely without Max having to make any noise. He was so exhausted that his body didn't want to stay awake even in the dangerous situation of an ambush, but the pills kept his mind from sleeping.

He reflected on a filly, whose racing career his father had followed till the day the old man died of a heart attack at the betting window. She was listed as a blood bay because all four legs were black above her ankles, but her sleek body shined a bright red color in the sun. A single white patch of hair grew between her eyes in the shape of a star. When this filly, named Huffy Lady, broke from the starting gate, she reached out and flowed over the track like a feral river flooding its banks with grace and natural efficiency. Max believed his dad loved the horse because she ran every race with integrity, never spitting the bit till the finish line was crossed. As the night wore into a gray limbo right before dawn, Max began to see her running along the treeline. The jockey rode low on her neck, pushing the reins up behind her ears. The rider had his father's face and clucked and drove her toward the wire. She was gaining on

something...she was there...come on Huffy. *Cluck...cluck..cluckcluckcluck...*

“Shit.”

“What the fuck...”

“Damn Santos, you almost blew my head off.”

Barnett shouted and rolled away from his M-60 machine gun. Max suddenly realized that the clucking noise was Rick’s old AK-47 spraying bullets into the shadows of a dying night. According to the Geneva Convention, Navy corpsmen and Army medics must not be armed. However, since the NVA refused to recognize that particular treaty, the squad members thought it best to give Rick a rifle. That way, the enemy didn’t make him their first target to prevent him from treating others. Max loaned him a weapon he had taken off the body of an NVA officer killed in a fierce firefight with his squad right after Christmas. He taught the healer to use it and the healer learned reluctantly, always uncomfortable with the idea of actually having to use it.

This particular night, the last time Max had seen him, Rick was leaning against the low cement wall that surrounded the schoolyard. His eyes rolled back in his head and the rifle rested, like a limp dick, between his legs. As Max crawled toward the concrete wall, he saw Rick kneeling beside a black lump. Johnson radioed for the mortar crew in the compound to fire flares while the squad held their positions.

“Shit. Oh shit. Mother of God.” Rick rocked back and forth over the motionless lump.

A flare popped and its canister fell from the sky with a hollow whisper. Max turned the shadow over. A thin, yellow, boy stared without blinking into Max’s face. The kid was thirteen, maybe fourteen, years old with greasy hair and a white scar above his

left eye. In the fluorescent glow of the flare, the boy seemed part of the earth that had broken off, without humanity, a surreal piece of loose soil. Maybe this is what the old timers meant by saying that the jungle grows green by the ground being watered with blood, thought Max.

“You shot a gook. Where’d he come from?”

“I don’t know. Swear to God, I don’t know. He’s just a baby.”

“A baby that wanted to kill you.”

Max grabbed the boy’s slack arms and rolled him right. Beneath the body, a Thompson sub-machine gun lay in the grass, safety off and round chambered. He realized that if the kid had been a seasoned fighter with quicker reactions, Rick would be the one they carried back in a rain poncho. Once more his luck had saved him.

“You’re a hero,” whispered Flea.

“No use whispering now. With all the noise we’ve made, most of I-Corps knows where we are. I’d say it’s time to move before his friends show up,” Barnett suggested and Max thought the suggestion was a wise one.

“The kid must have been sneaking along the school yard wall, trying to get into the marketplace...”

Johnson cut Max off in mid-sentence.

“Yeah, to plant a booby trap for one of us to trip on.”

“The little sucker stumbled over Doc’s big ass feet and got himself blown away,” Flea said, “Talk about some seriously bad mojo. Killed by a stinky ass jungle boot and a sleeping corpsman.”

“You only Boc-si ever kill Charlie in sleep,” said Tri, who was now searching the

boy's pockets for useful information.

“Shut up. How am I going to explain even having this gun?”

“Nobody has to know you shot him. When I report to the CO, I'll give kill credit to someone else.” Max looked around at the rest of the squad. “Who wants the kill?”

Flea waved. “Me. I already got eight confirmed. This one and another one and I'm off to Hong Cong for five days.” He looked at the Vietnamese in the squad. “And I want you little fuckers to know that your ears are just as yellow as his.”

No one argued because no one wanted to piss Flea off and then have to walk in front of him on patrol. Howdy Doody had a deal with every Marine in his four CAG units. Any man who could confirm ten dead enemy soldiers by his own hand received five days of liberty anywhere in Southeast Asia. Max hated the deal because farmers looked like Viet Cong when they were dead. If a guy like Flea got close to ten, the temptation was often too great and some harmless old man ended up dying, minus his ears. In Max's mind that was still murder and there were some lines he just simply refused to cross.

This kill was clean though, and he never gave the boy's age a second thought. When a child shoots you in the heart, you're still a corpse. Only Rick seemed agitated by any form of moral dilemma. Max helped throw the body onto a rain poncho, and then he made the Vietnamese drag it through the village at a fast pace. Back at the compound, he ordered Flea and Barnett to hang it on the concertina wire as a warning. The corpse would disappear before it rotted. Some local family member would sneak into the area late at night, pull it off the wire, and bury it. The Marines would let it happen.

As the sun rose hot, Max and Rick crawled into their bunker. Rick lit a Thai stick

and they laid on their cots, smoking.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Stop taking the speed you’re supposed to give us.”

“That’s not it. I close my eyes, I see his face.”

Rick stared at the ceiling, lying still with his hands behind his head. He held his breath, forcing the smoke to saturate his lungs. Max took a drag from the joint and followed Rick’s gaze upward, wondering what the corpsman was looking for.

“Whose face?”

“The kid’s.” Smoke exploded from Rick’s lungs. “I close mine, his eyes are in my brain wide open, staring at me. What if he liked baseball? What if he had a baby sister that he was feeding, or an old crippled mama san that couldn’t get out of bed to pee without his help...”

Max squirmed, sat up, and passed the joint to Rick.

“Listen to me... that little prick would have blown your brains out and probably nailed two or three more of us if he hadn’t been unlucky enough to trip over your jungle boots in the dark. You still don’t get it. You wear a peace sign on your helmet and you want to adopt every one of these little fuckers with a dirty face. This is a war and they all hate you. Wait till you get home in six days, then lead a goddamn march or something.”

“No, you don’t get.” Rick’s words slowed as the smoke laced with opium focused his mind on another plane and his eyes on the shadows rustling in the candlelight across the uneven sandbag walls. “I’m in the Navy, man. I’m in the fucking Navy. I joined so I wouldn’t have to waste anybody in this war. I’m not a big bad killer like you guys.”

“I bet you don’t want to be killed either.”

They both giggled, and then Rick's face froze.

"Some things are worse than dying."

"You're stoned man. Nothing's worse than dying because there's nothing after dying. You just get thrown in a big hole while someone shovels dirt on your unfeeling face, meanwhile some no account bastard who never made it to 'Nam is screwing your girl because she needs comfort now that you're dead."

"It's all pretty simple to you, isn't it?"

"It's as basic as it gets. Kill or be killed."

Rick threw his legs up off the cot and stretched. Max felt the tin ceiling getting closer and closer.

"There's got to be more to it than that."

"Why?"

"My dad bought me a daisy air rifle for my tenth birthday. I loved that gun. I shot every tin can my mom threw away. I shot windowpanes and light bulbs. I had the power, man. I had the power. One day I got tired plunking the same old things. We had this apple tree in our backyard and the ground was always full of rotten apples and the apples were always full of worms. This robin flies down looking to get fed and I shoot him right in the chest. He does this wild dance, feathers flying and boom, he falls."

Flapping his arms like wings, Rick jumped up from the cot and spun around the tight quarters twice. Then he fell backward laughing against a poster of Jimi Hendrix on the wall.

"So, you saved a few worms from getting eaten. You were a hero then and you're a hero now."

“No. I remember how cold the plastic stock felt against my cheek, how quiet the bird stood waiting for me to squeeze the trigger, like he knew what was coming and there was nothing he could do about it. I took away the one thing humans can’t give back.”

The laughter begin to evolve into a type of hysterical whine.

“For Christ’s sake Santos, it was a bird. People die in your arms everyday over here and you don’t get so melodramatic.”

“They die with me trying to save them. They don’t die because I killed them. After I shot that bird, I buried it and took three showers just to get clean from my own filth. I can’t explain it to you. There’s something wrong with taking a life, any life. Oh my God...”

“What’s wrong now?”

“What if I get home next week and strangle my sister or my mother in their sleep. What if I go crazy and can’t control myself. I’m a killer.”

“You’re already crazy and you’re not going to kill anybody back home.”

The fuel oil ran low in the smudge pot. The candle flames began to flicker. Max drifted into darkness after Rick finally shut up. Meanwhile, the world outside kept getting brighter.

The world outside kept getting brighter. Max checked the clock in the motel room again. 5:33AM. The night had worn away like sandpaper against the rough edges of his mind. He had never closed his eyes once except to blink. This was the longest night he’d been through in several months. When his war first ended Max believed he might be insane, the way the memories flooded into his consciousness at the least stimulation from

his physical senses. The smells were the quickest. It amazed him how powerfully smells worked the mind.

Some excited him, like the scent of a lonely woman in a crowded bar or the fragrance of an untried dish in an exotic restaurant; some soothed him, like the hint of alfalfa at the race track after a spring rain; some terrified him like diesel fuel when he hurried to beat a train or the hint of Jamie's aftershave in Rachel's hair that day he fell out of love with love. But mostly Max thought smells, like touch, taste, hearing, and sometimes sight, opened a pathway from the present to the past. The senses built a mental pipeline through which thought traveled from where it was back to where it had been. When this happened it was easy to feel like he was losing his mind because the memories those senses extracted were not vague. They always came forward clear and specific, like a Technicolor movie. Until Max read an article in some self-help magazine that said if you had enough presence of mind to think you were insane you probably weren't, he lived daily with the greatest anxiety he had ever known, the image of himself locked in a dirty VA hospital drooling and heavily medicated, without the ability to even remember who he was.

Little by little over the last five years, he accepted the memories as part of his present life and learned to deal with them on the inside while performing his normal routine of living on the outside. It was a matter of learning to live in two places at once, not necessarily easy, but doable if he kept control of his life. Occasionally things got out of hand because his room was too quiet, he was too tired, or drank too much, or not enough. Last night, it was the intensity of touching Sherry unexpectedly and the personal question about his personal tattoo that sent him wandering into sleeplessness and into the

world where the three swords on his arm finally became just one. Now, it was time to go back to the track and do his job. He hadn't reached the point of being hung over yet. The bourbon had worn off enough that Max wasn't drunk and not enough to make his head hurt. He thought a hot shower might renew him, and so he stepped into the shower stall. The water steamed and hissed. The nozzle was old and let out a small, shrill shriek that sounded like an animal caught in a trap. He held his head under the hot stream, letting the noise wash over him.

Wailing woke him. The noise was animal, but the source was human. Stumbling over Rick's empty cot, he threw the plastic sheet that served as a door aside and stepped into a white-hot sun. Through his confusion, Max knew it must have still been morning because the scent of fresh coffee and fried bread mixed with the stench of urine. In country he learned to measure time by certain smells, by hunger, by an X on the calendar, or the daily mail run from Phu Bai. He had traded his watch for a massage and a Singapore Sling months before. The only thing the watch was good for was to allow him a visible image of life slipping away.

Several of the guys from the mess tent ran toward the sound. Max grabbed his M-16, checked the magazine, chambered a round, and followed the crowd. Tri spoke in sharp, clipped words with an old man, "Hien nay duong nhu khong the song trong hanh phuc tren traj dat nay, du chi la trong khoang tho-igian ngan. Benh-tat, gia yeu, doi kem, toi ac, su bat-an va ap-buc thuong lam cho doi song da kho-so." Tri's mouth poured the sounds out so fast that Max was lost. If he could have seen the sounds in print with the accent marks properly placed, then he might have recognized the words and made some

effort at understanding the conversation. Even in his stupidity, it was easy to guess who they were talking about. A gnarled piece of flesh lay bundled in a plastic sheet. It looked like what was left of a woman, probably around sixty years old. A makeshift tourniquet knotted around her left thigh kept twitching. Below it, a mangled mess of flesh and bone dangled by the sliver of ligament.

The old man, who seemed to be her husband, shook an empty brass container in Tri's face. Max saw that a young woman was the source of the wailing noise that woke him. She held three dirty, sobbing children close. Rick knelt over the body and shut the woman's eyes with the palm of his hand. He looked at Tri, then the old man. His face was the color of white birch bark. Max noticed that the canister had come from an American mortar shell.

"Tell him his wife's already dead. The twitching is involuntary. There's nothing I can do."

"What happened here?" Max asked.

"When we called for flares last night, this canister fell away from one and went through their roof. It sliced the old woman's leg off while she was sleeping. She must have died of shock as they carried her here."

"Jesus."

"Jesus didn't have a thing to do with this classic fuck up."

Tri stepped back and handed Max the canister. The old man mumbled, the woman wailed, the children continued sobbing.

"He say you pay for wife. Beaucoup piasters. You kill, you pay."

"Tell him it was an accident. Please accept the apology of the United States."

After Tri turned and shouted a few phrases into the old man's ear, the family attached themselves to the plastic sheet and pulled the body back down Highway 1, as if they were returning from the market with a load of groceries.

“What did the old guy say?”

“He say no such thing as accident in war.”

Rick seemed to clutch his stomach at Tri's words and rose slowly. Max noticed that his friend lost his balance every couple of steps walking back to the bunker.

“Now what?” He yelled at the back of Rick's head.

“Now I smoke a bowl of opium.”

“Hey, not without me,” shouted Mac Barnett.

“Or me, white boy,” Flea said, from the corner of the guard shack.

Max watched the three of them disappear into his bunker. The rest of the crowd split away in different directions, some to write letters, some to clean weapons, some to mount the morning patrol. He was left alone to contemplate the lack of discrimination death always showed in Vietnam, and how it became part of the normalcy of life, like landscape. Rather than think too long, he sought comfort in what was available to create a distraction and found himself at Co Twi's front door.

Twis was a beautiful woman. Her father had been a French paratrooper, or French priest. Max never got the story straight and he thought Twis probably didn't care. When the French were thrown out in the early 1950's, the girl's mother raised her daughter to take over the family business as part of the great Vietnamese civilian contingent that serviced the military complex on either or both sides. It was a good living, Twis had told Max, especially after the Americans brought beaucoup penicillin into the village. Max

always purchased her services without guilt and today he was willing to pay an extra ten piasters for her to whisper *Rachel* in his ear as he climaxed.

The sun hung directly overhead and was very hot when Max left Twi's parlor and walked the few yards through the concertina wire into camp. The men that weren't on day patrol slept in the cool air of their sandbagged bunkers. Freddie sat behind the M-60 machine gun at the gate half-dozing, and waved Max in. Max waved back, as if Freddie was a crossing guard and he was on the way to school. After the intensity of the night's activities, the quiet morning gave him a strange feeling of security. Everything seemed okay and the day in Vietnam became the same as the day everywhere else. Max wanted to go help his friend Rick pack for the trip home, to tell him thanks for being there when he needed comfort and a listening ear after Jack's death. He wanted to be concerned for Rick the way he knew the corpsman was for him.

Rick sat outside their bunker on an old ammo box with his back to the camp, staring across the rice paddies and into the trees. Nothing moved, not even the air around Max as he walked. There were no cries, squawks, squeals, or chirps. Reaching out to tap Rick on the shoulder gently, so as not to startle the man, Max imagined what Rick's thoughts might be – pale women, the secret ingredients of Twinkies, playing softball with a fraternity team, med school, going home. It was all about going home. Max suddenly realized that nothing else mattered in Vietnam, just going home.

The air filled with the smell of gunpowder, the sound of a small firecracker exploding under a coffee can, and the texture of wet sand simultaneously. The wet sand, Max instantly realized was, in fact, bits of blood and bone from the back of Rick's head. "SNIPER", he screamed while his friend slumped over the rifle that rested between his

knees. Diving into the trench directly in front of Rick, he waited for another round to be fired. The world stayed silent. Rick slid off the ammo box sideways and fell beside him. For an instant, Max stared into the vacuum of his friend's open eyes. He noticed the tiny entry wound on the point of Rick's chin and for a split second he felt like the bullet ripped upward through the roof of his own mouth, the sinus cavities, the frontal lobe of the brain, and finally, exploded out the top of his skull. There were immediate questions about the angle of entry. There were other questions, but Max couldn't ask himself those. He began picking up pieces of the brain and skull from the floor of the trench, packing them back into the cavity as if he might somehow reanimate Rick's body before the others arrived.

He heard footsteps and screamed, "SNIPER. GET THE FUCK DOWN!" Flea and Mac Barnett rushed around the corner of the bunker. They dove into the trench and came up, weapons pointed into the silent tree line.

Those questions about the way Rick died had remained. He could never actually form the words like how and why in his conscious mind. All he knew for sure was, from that moment forward, nothing seemed exactly right. Over the last five years, Max had built an elaborate system of answers to the questions he was afraid to ask. In his memory, he gave the sniper a face, a rifle, a family, even a name. Had he also given him an existence? He cursed that nebulous thing called luck because Rick's ran out and it wasn't right that it happened the way it did. He felt the luck flow into him as it poured from Rick, and he hadn't asked for it. That first night after the death when the real thoughts came, the ones beyond instinct, the ones that reflected events clearly like photographs, he

wanted to somehow exorcise the luck. He finally understood why his friend hated it. No one could carry it without carrying the guilt that went with it.

Max couldn't stop going back to the silence before the gunshot and the stunning silence that remained after. Something was hiding in that space between the two silences, and if it wasn't uncovered soon Max felt like he might end up just another broken toy soldier. Toweling off, he dressed, picked up his riding helmet and chaps and walked outside the motel room. It was ten minutes till six and Dan expected him at the barn by six. The heat was already visible. It fell from the sky to the asphalt in a curtain the color of wax paper. By the time Max got to his truck, his clean shirt was soaked with sweat. He was hungry and sick, but mostly tired. He was very tired and the day had just begun.

Chapter Fourteen

In the instant of his utmost pleasure, Victor knew he was going to hell. He knew it just as sure as he knew Monk was sitting on his cot drinking a warm beer. He knew it and he didn't give a damn. Victor rubbed the top of the woman's head gently, as if she was his favorite dog, and stared at the ceiling in the feed shed. His five-dollar donation to the ministry of the preacher woman had gone a long way. Most men would have paid the money just for a quick blowjob after breakfast, without any thought of religion. But Victor had a conscience. He could never approach her and simply ask to receive head like a communion wafer, all the while knowing her holiness and divine calling.

There were very few memories that caused him any difficulties. There were very few not completely obliterated by beer, but he did remember his grandmother. From the time he was big enough to walk until he ran away to the racetrack at the age of fourteen, she whipped him like a stray dog into one revival tent after another. It was the one duty she never neglected as she raised him. Oh, she might have forgotten to cook supper, wash his clothes, whip him when he stole her snuff, or make him go to school, but she never forgot to drown him in Jesus.

For the first several years of his life, he thought all men were given the name "Reverend" at a certain age. Every Reverend coaxed and cajoled the sweat from his grandma's brow and the silver from her pockets. Some of the red-haired Reverends even found their way into grandma's bed. They all made the wind howl and the canvas tents tremble to Victor. When he was twelve, grandma reminded him how much he needed salvation when he hid in her closet to watch her undress. She hauled him to the county fairgrounds in the back seat of her '48 pea green, fluid-drive Chrysler and dragged him

by the arm onto Reverend's stage. The man slapped Victor's forehead hard. The spirit surged through him, made him lightheaded. He wobbled and was changed forever. From that moment forward, he always thought of himself as Christian. There were lines he wouldn't cross, no matter how tempting.

The preacher woman deserved respect. Here he was ready to shoot his wad in the midst of a moral dilemma. If only the preacher woman had not promised him salvation as she unzipped his pants. Why did a woman always need to make a man feel like he was getting something special from her that only she possessed? And now this salvation thing...if he came in her mouth, Grandma, the Reverend, and God would be unhappy.

The horses whinnied, stomped, and rattled their feed tubs up and down the shed row. That sound meant Monk was out of the tack room and coming toward the feed shed for a bucket of oats. "Hurry baby, suck it good." The woman grunted. The door creaked open.

"Fuck me," said Monk and dropped the empty bucket. Startled, the woman jerked her head upward, skinning Victor's dick with her teeth.

"Goddamnit. Goddamnit, I say." Blood seeped.

"Hey, how come you didn't wake me for some."

"Donate brother. You got to donate, I say."

"Fuck you. I'll donate alright," said Monk as he unfastened his pants.

"Jesus saves," screamed the preacher woman and shoved past Monk into the barn area. Storm Strike and the two stallions charged their stall webbings, thrusting massive chests against the nylon. The whole barn trembled. Two fillies whirled in their stalls and kicked the back walls with a loud crack. The woman ran across the road past the muck pit

and toward the track kitchen.

“I guess you ain’t got a mouthful. She’s going for breakfast.”

“I guess you better shut up. Shut up, I say.” Victor grabbed the empty bucket, scooped it full of rolled oats, and threw Monk the plastic feed cup. The entire stable of horses was agitated when Dan walked around the corner.

“What the hell’s going on? Get these horses fed you jack asses. You’re late. I want the bandages pulled while their eating. Victor, let Monk feed them. You pull the water buckets and hang them on the outside rail.”

“You want electrolytes in the clean water boss?”

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you asking me stupid questions? I swear to God, you’re both nuts.”

Monk giggled like a girl and Victor went into the tack room where he found the container of electrolytes. His dick stung from the skinning, his balls ached, but his mind felt light and painless. After he finished the water buckets, he would go tell Storm Strike of his good fortune. Even though horses don’t talk – well, except that one at Oaklawn Park last winter that recited the Lord’s Prayer when Victor had been hiding in the stall from his dead grandma who came back after he spent three days without drinking because no one would buy him any beer, and that funny horse on TV named Ed – Victor knew that old Stormy would love to hear a good sex story. He had been with Stormy for three years now, since the beginning.

Storm Strike was nothing more than a skinny, ill-bred two-year-old colt when Dan claimed him from a 7500 dollar claiming race. But Dan and Victor both saw the future in the way the little horse could reach out and eat up ground with those long legs.

They hadn't been wrong. Storm grew tall and put on weight. The horse was full of piss and vinegar. He ran everyone from his stall but Victor, and even Victor had to talk polite and request permission to enter the horse's private domain.

After the first two months, Dan called Doc Tandeni over to castrate Storm. Victor felt sorry for the colt, but knew he would be a better racehorse as a gelding. What upset Victor most was thinking that maybe someone would get the idea that hardboots would be better workers if *they* were geldings. He stood next to Storm's head and rubbed the long ears gently while Doc tranquilized the horse and did the surgery. Victor winced and got sick to his stomach when he heard Doc snip the two cords. It sounded like celery being snapped for a salad. Doc laughed and tried to make him look in the bucket, but he couldn't. After that, Victor spent every spare minute the next week walking, talking, or grooming Storm. Dan had made the right decision. As the racing season wore on, Storm picked up more weight, muscled out, and began to focus on the only thing left that mattered - running. That first full year, when he was three, the gelding earned 127,000 dollars on the circuit between Ellis Park, Churchill Downs, Latonia and Oaklawn Park. Victor couldn't imagine that much money, but knew it was a lot because Dan kept him well supplied with beer.

Storm's four-year-old season had been even better. Now, he was five and had already earned over 400,000 dollars in his racing career. In the meantime, he had become Victor's child. Victor refused to let anyone else handle Storm and Storm let Dan and Monk know things should stay that way. How many times had the big horse run Monk out of his stall and left Victor laughing? How many times had Dan fired Victor for being too drunk to work only to hire him back the next week because Storm wouldn't eat?

Victor didn't know why the horse liked him so much. Nobody else seemed to. The new exercise rider, Max, was pretty nice to him though. Maybe that's why Storm tolerated Max. Hell, some days the horse felt so playful that even Victor couldn't walk him around the barn. Then they all had to call Max because he was the only one with enough stamina to get the job done. And it was a matter of stamina because Storm would only take carrots from one person, Victor.

Chapter Fifteen

Everything seemed normal to Max, except Max, as he pulled up in his truck. Dan knelt beneath Storm Strike and ran his hands up and down both front legs, making sure the gelding hadn't wrapped a tendon or injured himself in some other way during the night. All the horses had their heads buried in the feed tubs. Victor filled the water buckets with the hose and Monk dragged the muck basket and pitchfork into the first stall and began forking dirty straw into it. Max got out of the truck, lit a Camel, and pulled his leather riding chaps over his denim jeans.

"You're ten minutes late boy," called Dan as he crawled from the stall and stood.

"Sorry boss, didn't sleep good and when I did go to sleep, it was hard waking up."

"Excuses are like assholes. Everybody's got one and they're all different. Get the gear and tack Storm. I want him to breeze a quarter under wraps, *and I fucking mean under wraps*. All I want to do is put a little speed into him coming out of the gate tomorrow. I don't want a bunch of nags shutting him off so Native Son gets by him."

"That won't happen, boss."

"Not if you do your job right."

In the tackroom, Max pulled a snaffle D-bit and bridle off a nail and slung it over his shoulder. As he picked up his favorite exercise saddle and a clean saddle towel, Victor came in and grabbed two rolls of vet wrap.

"Boss gonna bandage his back legs?"

"Yeah, he don't want no cuts on the back pasterns in case you pull the horse up too fast. Excuses are like assholes, assholes I say."

"Shut up, you little prick. I'm getting a headache that won't quit and you're voice

sounds like cheap sneakers on a gym floor.” Max searched through the footlocker for a flannel tongue-tie. He knew that Dan would want Storm’s tongue tied to his lower jaw so the gelding wouldn’t be out of control warming up. If the horse got his tongue over the top of the bit, Max would never be able to keep Storm Strike from running off.

“I got head for breakfast.”

“What?”

“Head for breakfast, from the preacher woman.”

“Bullshit.”

“Bullshit, I did. She said she couldn’t fuck me ‘cause she had acute angina. I said I’m glad something’s cute ‘cause your tits are sure ugly. What’s angina?”

“It’s heart pain. It means you could have a heart attack.”

“Shit, is that all. I’ve had pains in my chest for years. Ain’t had no attacks.”

Max found the piece of flannel he was looking for. Dan screamed. “Victor, bring me those bandages, NOW.” The little man ran down the shed row and Max wondered, as he watched him go, if Victor really did have heart trouble. The man should have some kind of health problem, drinking a case a beer a day and chain-smoking, but Max never knew how old Victor was. Hell. He could be sixty or more the way he looked and it usually took years for those kind of problems to finally show up. When he used to chide his father for being fat and drinking too much, his father would grin and tell Max he had chosen to dig his own grave with a fork

Storm was on his tie chain. Dan ran the last vet wrap down under the left rear ankle and back up the leg, leaving a perfect figure eight of elastic support and protection across the joint. Hanging the saddle on the stall cross bar, Max watched him finish with

admiration. This was art, like Monty the blacksmith shoeing horses, and Max couldn't do it. Oh, he could run the bandage, but not perfectly so that just the right amount of tension supported the leg. It required a real artist to do that.

"Make sure you get his tongue tied good. I'm going to get my stopwatch and head for the rail. Gallop him slow once around, then ease him into the quarter pole and let him breeze to the wire. Try to keep it around twenty-five seconds and don't let him run over a quarter. I want him fresh for tomorrow, not dragging his feet." Dan spoke directly into Max's face as left the stall. "Jesus, you smell like a brewery."

"I'm okay."

"You'd better be."

Max knew Dan wasn't kidding. If he screwed up this training exercise and the horse lost the race because of it, Dan would fire him. Mishaps were sometimes unavoidable because racing was a dangerous business, but if stupidity created the situation, then it wasn't an accident. Max didn't feel like riding, but that didn't mean he would be careless. Ducking into the stall, he set a felt saddle pad over the cross bar and on the saddle, hung the bridle on a screw eye, and laid the white towel across Storm's withers, careful to leave enough material so it would fold back between the pad and saddle.

As soon as the cloth tickled, the gelding began to fidget. Storm knows what's coming, thought Max, and the old boy likes it. Racehorses must feel the same as other athletes when they get up before a big game. Just putting on the equipment can make the adrenaline flow. Throwing the felt pad and saddle over the towel, he was careful to buckle the girth tightly and run the stirrups down their straps. Adjusting them would be

easier once he was on the Storm's back. The bridle caused some problems. As it went over the gelding's ears, Storm tried to back out of it. Max had his thumb and a finger on both ends of the bit against Storm's clenched teeth. He wiggled his fingers, rubbing the gums and trying to tickle the mouth open. No good. The old boy acted like he wanted to go to the track at first. What the hell was going on?

“Calm down Stormy. What's got you spooked old boy? It's just another day.” Max tried again, then again. Both times the jaw was clamped tight. He was losing his patience. His head hurt and his hands were trembling from the hangover that was fast becoming major. He shoved the bit hard against the teeth. Storm threw his head and the whole bridle flew against the stall wall, falling into the straw. “Goddamn you crazy bastard. You're going take this bit and we're going to the track. I'm tired of fucking with you.” Sweat poured off Max's forehead, stinging his eyes. A sick feeling rose in his stomach and he gagged. “Damn cheap ass whiskey and dumb ass horses.” Picking the bridle up, Max leaned against the webbing and took some time to catch his breath. He wondered if horses had some kind of extra sensory perception or instinct in their brains that turned on when they felt trouble coming. Max had it in Vietnam. By the middle of his tour, he could sense the Viet Cong's presence before he ever saw or smelled them. It was a valuable talent and had saved his life several times. The only time he lost that special sense was after Rick Santos died, and it cost him big time. His focus seemed to drive away with Rick's body bag in the back of the morgue truck. He paid attention to nothing. All he could think about was how close people finally came to living, only to die.

Now Max got spooked. If the gelding didn't want to go to the track, maybe there

was a reason why, and maybe his own focus was off again. What was he missing?

“Hey Monk, bring me the thermometer.” Max heard Monk drop the pitchfork in the next stall and walk to his groom box. In a few seconds, he returned with a thermometer tied with a long string to a clothespin.

“You think the old Stormy’s got a fever? He cleaned up his breakfast, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know. All of sudden he doesn’t want to go to the track.” Max spit on the thermometer to moisten it and stuck it in the gelding’s ass, clipping the clothespin to the tail so he wouldn’t lose the thermometer in the bowels.

“He ain’t got no fever. He’s waiting for his pussy.”

“He’s a gelding Monk. He’s got no balls, like you and Victor. What’s he going to do with pussy?”

“Not that kind. He’s waiting for the calico cat. Storm won’t go to the track till he sees the cat and gets a chance to kick its brains out.”

Monk had a point. Every morning since this meet opened, a calico cat came by the stall, jumped on the outside ledge and perched there till Storm came out. And every morning, Storm walked three steps down the shed row, stopped and fired both back legs toward the furry ball, never coming close. The cat was much too fast to catch a hoof upside its head. No one knew where the cat came from, or who it belonged to, but the cat helped Max understand the people he worked with. Dan, Monk, and Victor were all superstitious. They connected Storm’s great racing record at this meet to the horse’s relationship with the calico, like the cat was a talisman. This morning, it was late. To Monk that was an omen. Max extracted the thermometer and held it up to the light, searching for the mercury.

“It’s normal.”

“Told ya. It’s the cat.” No sooner had Monk spoken than the calico appeared and the horse whinnied, taking the bit into his mouth as if there had never been a problem.

As Monk unhooked the stall webbing, Max shook his head and led the big gelding out, walking him up a few steps. Storm made no effort to kick. The cat looked at him quizzically and stayed poised for the jump. “I’ll be damn,” said Monk. The groom took Max’s left leg in hand, and hoisted him into the saddle. The horse grunted as the rider settled into his seat. With his feet still out of the stirrups and Monk leading Storm around the barn, Max reached down and retightened the girth another notch. He knew the gelding’s trick of holding his breath when first saddled, and if the girth wasn’t tightened after Storm was forced to breathe, the saddle would probably loosen and slide off during the workout. Moving around the barn, he put his feet into the stirrup irons, measured the straps to make sure the bend of his legs was comfortable, then stood in the irons to insure their strength. When they turned the corner, reappearing on the front side of the barn, the calico cat waited as Max crossed the reins and knotted them.

“I wonder why he didn’t try to nail the kitty this morning,” Monk said, lifting his dirty ball cap with his left hand and scratching a bald spot on his head.

“Maybe he’s giving it a rest. I’m ready. Wet this tongue tie and put it on.”

Handing Monk the flannel cloth, he watched, holding the horse still as Monk dipped it in a water bucket, reached into Storm’s mouth, pulled his massive tongue out sideways, wrapped the tie around it once, and then made a bow knot under the jaw. “Make sure it’s not too tight.” Monk checked the tongue and Storm could still move it, but not get it over the snaffle bit. “It’s okay.”

“Hey, let me lead him to the track. I want to see the big horse work,”

“Victor, you’re just a lazy ass. You want me to clean his stall,” said Monk.

“I’ll give you two of my beers.”

Victor snapped a shank on the D of the bit and led horse and rider forward. Max noticed Storm cock his head and measure the distance to the ledge as they passed by the second time. When they reached a position even with the cat, Storm’s back end jerked up and Max felt like he had just gone over a speed bump on a bicycle. The cat got caught totally unaware. The full force of both back hooves lifted it in the air and rocketed it off the ledge. Tumbling end over end like a football, it landed in the muck pit on a pile of wet straw. The cat lay there for a minute, stunned.

“Jesus,” said Victor.

“I never seen a cat land on its back before. It must be dead.” Monk said, and with a frightened shudder walked toward the senseless animal.

“Is it dead?” asked Max.

Monk prodded it with the toe of his worn boot. The cat stirred and hissed. “No, but it’ll be crazy as a loon from now on, I bet.”

“Why’d old Stormy do that? I thought him and the cat was friends.” Leading horse and rider out of the barn toward the gap in the track railing, Victor directed his question at Max.

“I don’t know, but that was sure strange. I guess even friends aren’t always trustworthy, or maybe the cat just got what it deserved for teasing Storm all meet.”

“It’s a sign.”

“It’s bullshit.”

Chapter Sixteen

The racetrack hummed with activity. Horses of every size and color jogged, galloped, and ran counterclockwise, while others walked clockwise back toward the gap along the outside rail that had been opened onto the backside path into the barn area. The sun made Max squint and the dust from the dry surface made him cough. Dan took the shank from Victor, leading Storm Strike through the gap and into position at the edge of the track. Already bucking and playing, Storm scooted sideways and almost bumped the rail with his stifle. Max pulled hard on the left rein, forcing the head left and the stifle right, away from the danger of injury.

“Boy, he’s full of it this morning.”

“Yeah, so bow his neck and lope him slow around once till you get back here, then ease him into the rail and let him stretch out at the quarter pole. Wrap him back up as soon as you cross the wire.” Dan unsnapped the shank. Horse and rider were alone and one in the midst of chaos.

When they rounded the turn and straightened up to gallop past the stands for the first time, Storm Strike was in the middle of the track. As the horse relaxed into a comfortable stride, Max felt the pressure on the bit loosen just a little. The horse underneath him traveled like water flowing down the sandy track surface. There were no bobbles, no wobbling steps or indications of soreness and stiffness, only the smooth, steady changing of leads. Max knew that a clucking noise from him and a slight tap on the shoulder with his whip would unleash an explosion of muscle and wind and power in a split second. Storm Strike was ready to run and wanted to run because that’s what the horse was bred to do. It must be nice to only have to do what you were bred to do and do

it so well, thought Max. Most humans never got that opportunity. Hell, he wasn't even sure what humans were bred to do other than continue breeding.

Ronald Jacobs, a reporter from *The Daily Racing Form*, stood against the chain link fence next to the paddock area at the front side of the track. Max saw his binoculars hanging from his neck and his fist closed around a stopwatch.

"How far you going with him Max?" Jacobs yelled.

"Just a quarter. I'm bringing him back around to the pole and breaking off."

"Good. I might want to bet tomorrow."

"Short odds. Can't make any money."

The reporter disappeared from Max's peripheral vision. He looked ahead into the clubhouse turn. The track was clear. He checked for traffic over his left shoulder then his right, and prepared to move the horse in toward the rail slowly. He had to exercise caution now because Storm would take the movement from the middle of the track inward as a signal to stretch his legs from a gallop to a run. The closer they got to the rail, the stronger the horse would pull and the more difficult to hold back. A flurry of movement in the upper right field of his vision caused Max to raise his head. A crew of workmen moved onto the clubhouse roof with a load of new shingles. Two younger horses cantered by on his outside. A mare traveling at a two-minute clip thundered by on his inside, just a few feet off the rail. He felt Storm's potent rear quarters scoot under him and the horse's jaw pull harder against the bit. Storm Strike wanted to run with the mare. Both horse and rider began to anticipate what was coming. The adrenaline flowed and Max's head responded with clarity of purpose and concentration that even a hangover couldn't diminish. He felt renewed strength in his arms and hands. His legs were

powerful springs.

Passing the clubhouse turn and the five-furlong pole, they made a gradual move left so that the rest of the riders on the track would be aware that the rail belonged to Storm Strike in the very near future. It was not only a matter of courtesy to give breezing horses the rail; it was a matter of safety as well. Once Max let Storm have his head, the horse would be impossible to stop quickly, or jerk to the outside without injury if another horse loafed along directly in front of them.

The roofers began laying shingles down. The air hammers thumped as the roofing nails flew into the shingles. Max heard the distant echo, thinking that just the right pattern of hammering could very easily be mistaken for machine gun fire. God, when would that stinking war ever leave him alone? Distracted for just that split second, he heard, but ignored the first chirping of Randy Henderson, a young and stupid rider. Henderson had taken a green two-year old into the rail at the five-furlong pole and was charging full speed toward the turn. It was the same turn Max and Storm Strike just entered. Max gauged the distance to the quarter pole. He had twenty seconds before the breeze began and he was thinking about his hands. The outside world represented no threat. It was as if the boy and horse charging toward him were part of a movie Max was watching.

How much life did humans control and direct through the hands. Max knew that the old rider's adage – *it's all in the hands* – was true. Men and women expressed the very essence of their beings through them, the power of life and death was held in them. Now, the ability to direct and train and guide a tremendous athlete rested with them, an animal of such strength and magnitude that, without the gentle give and take of Max's hands against the reins, could never be controlled or contained. He reveled in his ability.

He began to slightly loosen his hold and let the bit slip down in Storm's mouth at the precise time Ricky Henderson screamed, "Breezing, watch out." A huge gray blur shot past Max on his left side between him and the rail. He saw a rider bouncing in the saddle like a frightened child and a horse out of control. He heard the crack of Henderson's whip on the horse's flank. He thought he saw Dan standing against the rail waving his arms and mouthing the word "no". Before Max even had time to wonder why a rider would whip a horse already running off, Storm dug his hooves in the track and was gone.

The big gelding needed no more urging than the thrill of competition. Just beyond the half-mile pole, Max felt the bit jerk and the reins tighten. The tug on the reins felt like fishing with his Uncle Jim and hooking a huge bass on light tackle. Storm hugged the rail, running down the young horse and rider as if they were standing still. Leaning back in the saddle, Max pulled against the pressure. The more he strained, the faster Storm ran. They were neck and neck at the quarter pole with Storm on the inside. Max screamed angrily, "Back off, Henderson." Henderson cocked his head sideways and answered, "Fuck you." With the whip between both horses in his left hand, Henderson tried to strike his horse on the left flank. Max screamed again, "Stop whipping your horse. There's no room." Henderson's whip came down on Storm's right flank with a loud pop. "Son-of-a-bitch."

The explosion of muscle and bone Max felt beneath him almost knocked him out of the saddle. In what seemed an instant, they reached the eighth pole and had jumped two lengths in front of the other horse and rider. Max's veins in his arms and legs seemed full of Jello. He knew if he kept pulling against the horse that he would fall off from exhaustion. It was like trying to hold a locomotive with a Kleenex. Bending low over

Storm Strike's neck, he gathered the reins, let go, and rode the horse out like a jockey in a race till they passed the wire. Max didn't know how fast they had traveled, but it was faster than Dan wanted the horse to go and certainly much further. He guessed they covered the half-mile distance in forty-seven or forty-eight seconds. Angry, he stood in the irons and started easing the horse back down into a slow gallop.

The other horse, still out of control with Henderson flopping around on it's back like a sack of potatoes, shot by them and entered the clubhouse turn just as the roofers nailed down another row of shingles. The air hammers echoed loudly and the horse spooked. Max saw it buck in mid-stride, dump Henderson, and bolt. He knew it wouldn't make the turn. Henderson stood and dusted off as Max entered the clubhouse turn himself and broke his mount down into a jog. The riderless gray ran full speed straight ahead, never even offering to lean into the turn, and jumped the outside rail. He watched it disappear between the barns at the south end of the racetrack amidst the stomping and jealous whinnying of the tethered horses it passed and knew it would pull up somewhere by the levee to eat grass, unbothered and unhurt.

Jogging toward the gap where Dan waited, Storm threw his head up and down like a piston, snorting and playing with Max like an unruly child. The work didn't hurt the horse and Max knew it, but it might make him a little stiff or lazy tomorrow, and racing was a game where fortunes were won and lost by inches. Why in the hell did that jerk Henderson force the issue? Why didn't he just back off, or wait till Max started his breeze at the quarter pole? Was the boy just that stupid and inexperienced? Max had no more time to think about it because Dan screamed, red-faced and sweaty.

"What the hell happened out there?" Dan trembled so much he could hardly snap

the lead shank on Storm's bit.

"Didn't you see that bastard cut me off?"

"Why didn't you take hold of Storm and ease him outside?"

"Ease him outside? The little prick hit us with his whip. How in the hell am I going to hold this bear back while someone else is whipping and driving him?"

"Son-of-a bitch. I must have been born under a black cloud. One day before a stakes race and the horse runs off. I may have to scratch him."

"I don't think so boss. He pulled up great and he isn't even winded. This wasn't the best deal, but it shouldn't take too much out of him for tomorrow."

"We'll see what his legs look like in the morning and how good his appetite is tonight. Who's that little fucker on the other horse work for?"

"He just freelances. Most trainers won't put him on a horse, he rides so bad."

"Did he clip you with his whip on purpose?"

"I don't think so. I think he was trying to hit his own horse."

"Then I might not strangle the idiot."

Max knew Dan well enough to know his anger was subsiding, replaced by anxiety. Storm looked none the worse for wear, and thanks to the fact that Max was good on a horse, they had managed to get through what could have been a disastrous situation with only a little inconvenience. The horse had only run full out about three-eighths of a mile and by staying balanced and calm, Max managed not to clip the other horse's heels or collide in the turn. Still, he felt bad because of his slow reaction time. Storm got up a head of steam and rolled away with him before he actually realized what had happened. It was a mental lapse and those kinds of errors could be devastating, thought Max, as Dan

led horse and rider in a slow walk toward the barn. Max's father always told him that if a ballplayer dropped the ball it was just a matter of being human. Everyone makes physical mistakes. But if a baseball player threw to the wrong base or swung at a bad pitch on a 3-0 count that was stupidity and it always cost something. To play the game well, a player must keep his head in the game at all times. Hadn't he learned that the hard way in Vietnam? Hadn't watching a little, mangy ass dog limp across the road on a quiet morning been a costly mental error?

Max slept in one morning that next week after Rick Santos died, something very unusual since the Tet Offensive had started. Max and most of the other Marines and Viet militia in the compound had been on 24-hour alert for the past seventy-two hours. They were stopping refugees from Hue at a security point in the village all day and patrolling the perimeter all night. No one had time to mourn Rick, not even Max. Death was life and life went on.

Checking identification cards proved to be easy work after Max got past wanting to kill all the Vietnamese students his own age with draft deferments. How could the U.S. government keep sending guys like him over to die for the Republic of South Vietnam while these chicken shit little bastards beat their own draft and got out of fighting their own war by going to some lame-ass university in Hue? Looking into their sallow faces and taking the cards from their trembling hands, Max suddenly realized they hadn't escaped the war. Men like him had trapped them in the middle of it. So, rather than shoot the bastards, he kept his mouth shut and did his job.

But the night duty wrecked him. He was the best point man in the whole TAOR,

maybe all of I Corps area. He knew it and the unit commanders in Phu Bai knew it as well. Every night for almost a week, he had taken out his squad for ambush. The strain of sitting all night and waiting to kill someone or be killed by someone made him feel like his insides were on fire. He needed sleep badly and was overjoyed when headquarters radioed a stop to the security checks. The refugees had cleared Hue. Now there were only Marines and Viet Cong dying.

An absence of morning duty equaled a good four hours of sleep. When he finally awoke, the clang of John Fogerty's guitar kept him that way. He saw Ron Johnson outside the bunker, sitting on sandbags and waving to the women cultivating their rice paddies around the concertina wire. The old women had an amazing resilience that Max respected. They kneaded the black earth in brackish water up past their ankles. They did it every day, as if the carnage around them existed in some parallel reality. Only the women had the power to bring the dead earth back to life. Johnson waved and an old woman in a wide brimmed straw hat waved back. Johnson stood and pointed at his pecker. He had pulled his jungle fatigue pockets inside out and his dick hung from the front. "See my elephant," he screamed.

A boom box rested on the wall of sandbags beside him. Johnson had tuned it to *Hanoi Hannah*. No one knew where the commie bitch got the latest American music, but she sure pumped Creedence Clearwater Revival over the airwaves this morning. Fogerty's raspy voice blared into the bright sun. Max laid on his cot and sang along on time, but off key – *Some folks are born made to wave the flag, ooouuu they're red, white and blue and when the band plays Hail to the Chief they go to Cadillac U. It ain't me, no it ain't me. I ain't no Senator's son. It ain't me, it ain't me y'all. I ain't no fortunate one.*

Some folks inherit star spangled eyes and they send you off to war. When you ask how much should you give, they only answer more, more, more...

“Shut the fuck up. You’re spoiling the goddamn song.” Johnson yelled as he stuck his head through the doorway. Max wondered how a human being so ugly could have passed the induction physical. Johnson’s eyes were crossed. His nose rose almost even with the rest of his face and spread across it like chunky peanut butter. The eyebrows were black caterpillars and his thin, tight lips drew his mouth into a constant sneer. But Max’s cruel curiosity dissolved rapidly. Ron Johnson handled himself fearlessly in a firefight and that was the real mark of beauty in the jungle.

“Put your dick back in your pants before you talk to me, you pervert.”

Johnson shoved it in and buttoned his fly.

“Let’s smoke a number before breakfast,” he said.

“It’s almost time for lunch and I only got one can of pound cake and peaches left from my c-rats. If I smoke any dope, I’ll want two and then I’ll be frustrated and beat your ass.” Max stood and moved closer to Johnson. “Oh, I’m sorry. The light’s bad in here. That’s your face.”

Randy Kowalski, one of the six new replacements sent by headquarters in the last month, stuck his head inside the bunker. “Corporal Murphy, the CO’s on the line.”

“Fuck Captain Howdy Fucking Doody.”

“He says it’s priority one.”

“The only thing priority one with that red-haired little prick is staying under cover in Phu Bai,” said Ron Johnson as he pushed his way back outside.

Max sat back down and pulled his jungle boots over a very nasty looking pair of

olive green socks. Then he followed Kowalski to the communications bunker. Picking up the hand microphone, Max spoke slowly.

- *Cag one actual, cag one actual, this is Hunter one, do you copy, over -*

The radio receiver spit back.

- *Hunter, this is cag actual. There are Whiskey India Alphas enroute. Make sure the field is open. I repeat make sure the TAOR field is open. The ball is in your court. Do you copy, over? -*

- *This is Hunter one, I copy. Out. -*

So much for a day off. A truckload of wounded Marines from the battle in Hue rolled down Highway 1 toward the MASH unit in Phu Bai. Evidently the ground fire in Hue had been too heavy for the medi-vac choppers to land. Max's CAG group straddled the highway halfway between the two places and the captain just ordered him specifically to ensure that no enemy roadblocks in their Tactical Area Of Responsibility impeded the truck. The captain relied on Max's experience in tight situations. Max usually felt a little pride in being singled out, but since he was so "short" time-wise, the pride quickly evolved into paranoia. No man could tempt fate forever, could he? Even Rick's luck finally ran out.

He didn't have the heart to wake his whole squad for a routine assignment, so he mounted a patrol quickly from members of the third squad. He did ask his interpreter, Tri to go with them in case a long conversation was required from some villager. Well, at least that's what he told himself at first. But maybe the idea of having one trusted friend to watch his back in a squad full of green replacements played a role in that decision as well. Tri hesitated, and then mumbled a mixture of Vietnamese and French. Max

understood very few of the words but the dull shifting of Tri's black eyes was unmistakable. The man looked like a fox caught in a trap and faced with the decision of waiting for the hunter or gnawing off his own leg.

“Beaucoup mal. Het roi. Je suis het roi.”

“Sorry buddy. Somebody who knows the village has got to keep me company. This is a cakewalk anyway. We stroll up the road, we saunter back.”

“Cake walk beaucoup mal when VC trying to shoot me.”

Tri picked up his old M-1 carbine, checked the magazine, opened the bolt, chambered a round, and marched out past the wire with Max. The sky clouded over and Max smelled ozone in the air. Another rainstorm would soon shatter the crystal-like brightness that made the air shimmer between the sellers' booths and the barbershop in the marketplace. Tri walked on the left shoulder of the highway even with Max, who moved slowly along the right shoulder. The rest of the third squad followed in single file about twenty meters behind Max. If his mind had been in the game, he would have staggered them on both sides of the road and far enough apart to keep a free fire zone for each man. He would have noticed the emptiness that surrounded and swallowed him. Not even a stray dog wandered through the village looking for scraps. It wasn't too unusual for the villagers to be out of the sun at this hour, but no dogs, no child's eyes shining in the shadowed doorways?

Beyond the barbershop, someone had piled brush, garbage, small trees, and a couple of 55-gallon drums across Highway 1 between the temple on Max's side and a small, concrete bus stop on Tri's side. The road was impassable. Max would need to plant a satchel charge in the brush and blow it clear before the trucks arrived. He signaled for

one of the new replacements, whose name he couldn't remember, to bring up the rucksack full of C-4 explosive. The man ran up behind Max inside a small drainage ditch just off the asphalt. Dropping the bag, he knelt for orders.

“Go back and tell whoever’s on the radio to call base and let them know there’s going to be an explosion in a couple of minutes. We’re blowing this roadblock.”

A solitary dog of undetermined genealogy trotted from behind the barber’s hut. The dog looked pitiful and out of place to Max. He couldn’t take his eyes off of it. Its long ears flopped in different directions with each step. Its coat looked the color of a dirty tennis ball, frayed and patchy as if Arthur Ashe had served it through one too many sets. The dog wobbled slightly as it moved, probably weak from hunger or disease. Tri watched and laughed. “Cahn cho,” he said, and licked his lips. “Not even if I was starving,” Max smiled and answered as his friend made a mock move to snag the dog. Clip clop, clip clop. The dog’s long nails scraped along the highway as it came straight toward Max. It was the only sound he heard. The cadence sounded exactly like the metronome on his mother’s old piano that one summer long ago when she forced him to take piano lessons. The steady beats entranced him. Louder and louder the clip clop clipped and clopped toward him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tri rise and step into the brush looking for booby traps. Max picked the satchel charge up and met the dog halfway. Together they clip clopped toward Tri and Max reached down to scratch the dog’s head on the move. The dog licked his hand.

Their rhythmic sound disintegrated, split apart by a low whistle. The whistle carried chaos in its wake. An explosion lifted Max off the ground and threw him into the ditch beside the road. The mangy dog ran past his head unscathed and disappeared behind

the temple. Between the time Max hit the ground and the first tingle of warm liquid ran down his left arm, the trees on the opposite side of the road burst into orange sparks as if the their trunks were made of steel and being struck by some god's angry hammer.

Hundreds of tracer rounds flew in all directions over his head. He saw nothing and heard nothing now but the rain of phosphorus tipped lead thumping into the dirt around him.

With his head down, he propped his rifle on the lip of the ditch and began firing blindly into the trees. When one magazine emptied, he pressed the release and inserted a new one. He smelled the metal barrel heating up. He smelled blood and watched it drip from his fingers, irrigating the earth. Rolling onto his right side, Max noticed his left pant leg also soaked, but there was no pain. The arm and the leg were strange appendages that belonged to another creature. Pain was a thief in the night. It never came while you watched.

The squad behind him fired sporadically, unable to engage the ambush fully because each man had set up right behind the other. They blocked their own field of fire. He heard nothing from Tri's M-1 carbine. Suddenly, there were two quick thumps, then a smoke grenade popped open and white smoke began to drift over him. One of the thumps exploded in the trees. He recognized the sound as a shell from Flea's M-79 grenade launcher, quickly followed by the same sound three more times. A whishing noise like a vacuum cleaner rushed over his head, moving away from him. Someone had fired a LAW rocket into the roadblock blowing it to hell. The enemy firing lessened. The deep, steady rhythm of an M-60 machine gun pounded into the spaces between the trees. Smaller caliber rifle fire trailed it. Max took a chance and raised his head slightly to look out over the road. Barnett, Chavis, Johnson, and the rest of *his* squad were coming for him. They

were on line and walking directly toward the trees, firing constantly. As they passed the pinned down recruits one at a time, the new boys jumped in line beside them. Already the heavy, determined fire withered the ambush.

Across the road, Tri lay on his back and stared at some distant hole in the blue sky. Max went after him. He crawled on all fours, staying below the curtain of fire as the men moved closer. The nearer Max came to Tri, the farther away he got from his home. Southern Indiana was a vague dream of baseball and freckled farm girls tied to his arm like helium balloons. Max put his ear against his friend's slightly parted lips. A faint gurgling rose from somewhere inside. He noticed a small stain below Tri's shirt pocket. A chest wound sucked the life out of the little Vietnamese. Max fumbled in his own shirt pocket, pulled a wrinkled pack of Camels out and removed the cellophane wrapper. Slapping it over the hole in the chest, he pressed tightly, hoping to hold a vacuum and keep the lung from collapsing till a surgeon in Phu Bai could treat Tri. Tri gurgled. Blood seeped around the edges of the cellophane.

By now, enemy fire had dissipated considerably. The men were past him. Some kept firing. Some cleared the remains of the roadblock. Ron Johnson knelt beside him.

"How bad?"

"Where's my pressure bandage? I got to keep this lung covered."

"Not him." Johnson spoke quietly. "You."

In the distance the truck appeared. Max could barely see the grill and the headlights, but he knew the back was loaded with wounded men and he would soon join them.

"Flag the truck down. We'll get Tri on it."

The pain came now, hard. His whole left side felt like someone had stuck a hot poker into his flesh at various intervals and twisted. He knew by the sources of his pain they were non-fatal shrapnel wounds and would heal, but the feeling that he'd just made a mental error, that he just threw the ball to the wrong base and that his father would be disappointed, pierced him deeply. Johnson pushed Max's hand aside and removed the cellophane from Tri's chest. The gurgling had stopped. Max wondered if Tri's wife could grow rice alone.

Victor and Monk waited by the water buckets at the barn. Max smelled the Tuttle's elixir Monk had poured into the rinse bucket. It would help Storm cool out and keep the gelding from getting too stiff. Everyone was soaked with sweat. The horse looked like he had rolled in a vat of whipped cream. Dismounting, Max unbuckled the girth, pulled the saddle, towel, and pad off, and hooked the bridle in his right hand, sliding it down over the horse's head. Max realized for the first time he was breathing hard. His knees folded under him and he almost fell. His arms shook as he threw the saddle over the sawhorse and hung the bridle on a nail. Monk fastened Storm's halter over the horse's head and around his nose and stood him by the wash buckets. Dan walked into the tack room, pale and looking like a possible candidate for open-heart surgery. The locked medicine chest held a bottle of Old Charter bourbon that Max knew would soon be diminished. Victor rubbed a soapy sponge over Storm's hot body in perfect cadence with his motor mouth.

"I seen it. I seen it, I say. The prick, the little prick. He couldn't ride a damn billy goat. You did good Max. Old Storm could still be running, if you hadn't got him pulled

up past the wire. He could still be running. That other boy oughta be ruled off the track. Ruled off, I say.”

“They don’t rule you off for being stupid,” said Monk.

“What if he wasn’t stupid? What if he was trying to get Storm out of the race tomorrow.”

“Why would he do that? He ain’t got a horse in it.”

“No but his butt-hole buddy does.”

“Who’s his buddy,” Max said, walking toward them from the barn with a cup of water in his hand.

“Manny. Manny Devereoux taught him everything he knows, which sure ain’t much.”

Max felt the anger push up his spine. The hairs rose on the back of his neck. He knew the danger of feeling this way because often his actions were not based on good judgment. Years of people telling him that he should learn to control his impulses made him self-aware of his flaws. Still, he couldn’t stop the pressure in his head when he heard Victor link Manny’s name with what had just happened on the track, especially after the conversation he had with Manny at the softball field the night before. When Henderson came roaring by, Max blazed. When Storm Strike pulled up safely the fire burned out, and Max remained only slightly irritated by Henderson’s ineptness. Now, the thought that the whole incident may have been intentional ignited the flame again.

He tried to put his mind at ease as he cooled out Storm Strike. He fought the idea that he had been used as he helped Victor cover Storm’s legs with poultice and bandages in the stall. He galloped the other horses in the barn that needed exercise with cool

precision, but nothing tempered the flame. By the time the morning's work was finished and the tack cleaned, Max could no longer speak. He needed to find Ricky Henderson and hurt him.

"Lunch time." Monk yelled while raking the shedrow. Victor threw a cup of oats into each feed bucket and hung them on the stall walls. All the horses charged the feed and ate with relish, except for a thin filly that had a slight fever and runny nose. Dan paid particular attention to the way Storm Strike reacted to Victor. The big gelding whinnied loudly, whirled, and chased the little man from his stall.

"Goddamn. Goddamn, I say. You ornery old fart. Kill a man why don't ya."

Dan's laughter echoed through the barn. Two shots of bourbon and the sight of the horse playing lessened his anxiety. Max watched all this out of the corner of his eye as he put away the equipment and locked the tack boxes. Storm Strike felt invigorated by the morning's mistakes rather than dissipated. That was a good word, dissipated. It described the bottom of Max's stomach. He needed food to soak up the sick, empty feeling from last night's whiskey and answers from Henderson to chill his quiet rage.

Max found the young rider leaving the track kitchen. At first he intended only to ask Henderson about the incident, but the more Max looked at him and the more Henderson averted his gaze, the more Max needed a physical release. In one swift motion, Henderson dangled on his tiptoes against the cinderblock back wall of the building. Max never meant to lift the boy entirely off the ground when he placed his forearm under Henderson's chin and pushed him backward. It just happened.

"You could've killed me this morning, you little prick, and I want to know who put you up to it. Did Manny?"

“It was an accident. My horse was running off.” Henderson gurgled and shook violently to get free, but beyond the fact that Max outweighed him by twenty-five pounds, he also knew exactly what he was doing. Enough pressure on the Adam’s apple and it would pop into the throat. The boy would choke to death, and for an instant, Max didn’t care. Then Max remembered that it was just a stupid horse race. He had been tricked into hurting people before and the power to hurt became part of him, but it couldn’t be all that was left of him. There had to be more. God, didn’t there have to be more?

“Accident. Fucking accident.”

The words seemed to dribble from the corner of Henderson’s mouth with the saliva and Max knew the words rang true. In the noon sun with the stench of old leather, molded hay, and manure gagging him, Max vomited down the front of the boy’s sweaty tee shirt, then dropped him to the ground. While Henderson lay there sobbing and cursing, Max ran to his truck and drove away. He was terrified of everything inside him.

Rubbing the forearm that now rested on his steering wheel and had previously been choking a human, he felt the small, round smoothness of a deep scar. On the island of Okinawa on the way to Vietnam, Max drank Singapore Slings with another Marine named Richard Lehner. After several drinks they put their forearms together and dropped a lit cigarette between. Staring into the other boy’s wet eyes, Max rolled his arm upward, crushing the fire into the flesh in an effort to tangibly prove an abstract word that neither one understood, courage. He remembered exactly the smell of burning tissue and how smug and superior he felt when the other boy jerked his arm away with a curse. He also remembered exactly how scared and insignificant his bravado became two weeks after,

when the first napalm shells fell on a small village outside Quang Tri and the stench of burning flesh covered his clothes, his food, his drinking water, and his dreams for weeks.

No way existed any longer in Max's mind to justify his occasional violent outbursts, or the lapses between what he *knew* was right in every humane sense and what he could not *feel* was right in any human sense. What if he hadn't gotten sick and vomited? Would he have choked Henderson lifeless because of something so meaningless as a race, or would he, could he have stopped on his own? The questions brought the anger back, and Max turned the anger inward as he always did. Passing the Bridgeview Tavern, he stopped the truck and made a U-turn.

Chapter Seventeen

Never underestimate the excitement of a big race, the attention of a decent man, and a good night's sleep in any given seventy-two hours to make a girl rethink her options thought Sherry. In the early dawn light of Saturday, she untied Native Son's knee spider, removing the cloth and the fleece pad carefully. Running both hands down the knee, front and back, Sherry felt for pockets of fluid in-between the three carpal joints and for any open sores or "spider bites" caused by the bandage. Native's left knee seemed clean and healthy, even though she recognized the illusion. She grabbed the hoof and lifted the leg. The knee flexed smoothly and the horse showed no signs of pain, only irritation at being bothered. The second time Sherry flexed the knee she heard a click in the joint, as if someone stretched a rubber band tight and let it go. It was the cartilage. She didn't like hearing the noise, but nothing short of a new knee would eliminate it. Every old warrior carries battle scars.

Max had disappeared after training hours yesterday. She didn't see him at all. She heard about the near disaster on the track and knew he would have been in a bad mood like anyone else who almost gets killed by stupidity. If she told him what she felt yesterday, that a real relationship was out of the question, there would have been no way to gracefully change her mind today. It wasn't like her life was full of other options. What did her future hold – another ten years, twenty years maybe, mucking stalls, trying to keep lame horses running, getting drunk twice a week, getting laid by would-be cowboys who thought their cocks were spurs to be dug deep into her driving her toward their own finish line as if making love were a race against time? This man touched her differently. His hands stroked instead of pulled. His tongue caressed rather than pushed.

He acted like she was another human, and in the end, didn't that prove to be what mattered? Even the fact that he seemed to lose interest in sex *during sex* began to intrigue rather than insult her.

Sherry remembered being a small girl and first learning to eat. She had to keep all her food apart. When her mother cooked pancakes and threw them on her plate, Sherry fought the syrup to keep it from running into the bacon and over the eggs. Everything tasted good when it was in its place. She could enjoy them separately as she chose and when she chose without obscuring the clarity of the taste. As she grew older, her philosophy for food transferred to the way she dealt with men. Sherry always placed men in different categories. Some gave her the taste for love, some for friendship. She struggled with herself to keep them from running together and spoiling the taste of both. Beside her on the blanket Thursday night laid a man who confused her very trusted rules to live by. How could she be so attracted to this person and like him at the same time? What about the risk?

The question had no meaning physically. She took risks everyday on the racetrack without questioning the reasons or the possible outcome of her actions. When Sherry handled a rough horse, it was without responsibility for or dependence on any other person. She manipulated her own present and directed her own future. Now her mind whirled with doubt, excitement, fear, and an anxious feeling that she could only picture as a giggle. Sharing herself with Max would be like running her food together on the plate. If the sexual urges she felt and the friendship she desired from this man suddenly mixed, would the result be the sacrifice of one or the other, or could something new greater than the sum of both develop? Sherry was frightened by Max, yet at the same

time, wanted Max to rescue her from that feeling.

If having Max was a mistake, it was too late. There comes a time when a galloping horse breaks into a run, when the rider understands the control is gone, the tongue is over the bit. She knew nothing about this man, where he came from, what he had done or might do, except that he broke out of a canter and into a sprint on the river bank the other night, and then spit the bit as if the speed scared him. Horses were much more predictable than men. When they ran off, the best thing to do was take a good seat and enjoy the ride. They ran till they couldn't run anymore, then spit the bit and came back to the tug of the reins. When that happened horses were easy to control because they were spent. Men were not horses. Max had a lot of run left in him when he quit.

What had possessed her to offer herself to this person like some whore in a cheap bar? Shit, she was a whore in a bar. When she felt Max all around her, over her, on her, and finally his fingers in her, when the sound of zippers, snaps, buckles, and escaping air tangled in the night with crickets, owls, foghorns, and rushing water, she had lost the struggle between what she thought she knew and what she wanted desperately to know. Then Max just pulled up, as if he'd broken down in the stretch run. How was she supposed to feel about that? No matter what happened in the future, Sherry needed to find out if this one man might be the connecting point of all her feelings toward all men. She needed to know why he did what he did. Did he stop himself from going all the way because he respected her? She didn't have a clue, but it was a good way to think about what happened. After all, men were not horses. Men were not horses. Men were not...Men were...Men.

Native Son dropped his head and nudged Sherry. She fell backward and sprawled

in the straw like a stray cat. "You feel good, huh boy? We'll see how good you feel when you're neck and neck with Storm Strike in a few hours." Sherry saw her dad walking down the shedrow, bowlegged and with a slight nervous twitch in his right hand. She stood.

"Did he eat his breakfast?"

"Every oat and licked the tub and hollered for more."

"I think I got a shot to outrun the favorite today. That horse ran off with the crazy ass Vietnam vet yesterday. Might have just took a little edge away from him today. Lucky break for us."

"I heard Ricky Henderson spooked Storm Strike when he was getting ready to breeze. Somebody could've got hurt."

"Yeah, but nobody did and like I said, either way it's a lucky break for us. There's only three other horses in that race. It's a short field because everybody on this track knows that Native Son and Storm Strike are the two best. It's a waste of horsepower to run against them. There won't be any traffic out there today and when they turn for home, the two of them will be neck and neck in front of the other three. Now if old Storm is just a little off his game and Native is on, we could make us a fat thirty thousand dollars by nightfall."

Sherry stood and faced her father.

"He isn't crazy."

"What? Who?"

"I said Max isn't crazy. He's just had a lot of things happen to him."

"You better watch yourself around that boy. I don't trust him any further than I

can throw this horse.”

“I don’t think he trusts you either.”

“Good. Now I gotta go sweat off a couple of pounds in the steam room. I can’t be over a hundred and eighteen on those scales today. Doc’s coming over shortly to medicate my big boy.” Manny patted Native on the head and ducked underneath the stall webbing. Walking out of the barn, he turned and said to Sherry, “Bring him over to the paddock with the pony. Don’t try and walk him all that way by hand. He’ll be too rough.”

“I think I know that already. Now get out of here.”

She busied herself for the next hour waiting for Doc Tandeni. The pony needed his stall cleaned. She did it, then pulled the feed tubs from the two stalls and scrubbed them out with hot water, cleaned Native’s racing bridle with Murphy’s oil soap, and finally stripped his stall of straw, raking the dirt floor bare. The old boy would get hungry before the race and his hay had been removed. A belly full of nasty straw could cause colic. Funny how horses latched onto anything and everything available when they were hungry, thought Sherry, even if it killed them. A yellow Cadillac whirled around the corner and slid to a stop in the gravel.

“Damn Doc, you’re going to kill somebody one of these days.”

The veterinarian jumped from his car as the trunk flew open. He pulled two vials from a black bag in the trunk and two clean, plastic syringes from a box. Drawing the syringes full of clear liquid, he smiled at Sherry.

“If all you hardboots didn’t try to make money with crippled horses, I wouldn’t have to hurry every morning to get them drugged up.”

“You also wouldn’t be driving a new Cadillac.”

“Point taken. Now put a lead shank on the old boy and let me give him a cocktail.”

Sherry held Native Son and Doc placed the thumb of his left hand against the horse’s huge vein in his neck. The vein quickly swelled with blood, the needle pierced the flesh. Tandeni aspirated the syringe, making sure he had punctured the vein and not the artery beneath it. Dark, almost chocolate colored, liquid flowed backward into the syringe. He pushed the handle upward and pumped the fluid into the horse’s bloodstream.

“What’s in the other one?”

“Something your dad ordered,” said Doc, inserting the second needle into a triangular area of muscle on the neck.

“We always run this horse on Bute, but never anything else.”

“Well, he thought that, besides relieving some pain, we might want to help him breath a little better. It’s going to be a hundred degrees today and the humidity will make it seem like the air is a wall of water.”

“Camphor and oil?”

“You guessed it.”

“I know that stuff’s illegal and people use it all the time. How come nobody ever gets caught?”

“Sherry you should know by now that nothing’s illegal on the track unless someone tests for it. When these guys blood test a horse after a race they check for narcotics and the caine drugs, not much else. That leaves me some amazing options.”

As Sherry unhooked native from the shank and ducked out of the stall, she heard Doc, who was already at his car, speak to someone. It sounded like Max and a slight rush

ran up her neck into the back of her head, like a butterfly rising. He rode by slowly on a chestnut mare that she recognized as one of Dan's claiming horses.

"Hey Max, you're out awful early," she said nervously.

"I didn't have you to keep me up all night last night."

Sherry's cheeks flushed slightly as she smiled. "Want to get a drink after the race? Maybe we could talk some more about stars and planets."

"Sounds great. But if your horse wins, you buy the tequila."

Nudging the mare's shoulders with his knees, Max turned the corner. The mare walked with her head down. They hadn't done anything but gallop a mile and a half, but she was tired. In this heat and humidity, most of the horses Max galloped would rather have been left in their stalls underneath the electric fans. As a matter of fact, thought Max, no animal should have to work in this heat, including him, but like horses, humans didn't always control their own destinies. The image of a flack jacket flashed through his mind and the words stenciled on the back made him remember the heat of the jungle and the exhaustion that took months to go away – *when I die I'll go to heaven because I spent my time in hell.*

Breathing deeply, he thought the slight breeze had trapped a hint of Sherry's perfume, but it was only vanilla coffee brewing in Stan Bridger's tack room.

Chapter Eighteen

The bare nail frightened Victor. Short hairs on the back of his head rose like an electric current had passed over them and his stomach jumped as if he had seen his grandma rise from her well-deserved grave. He stared at the nail. The single bare spike of steel on the tack room wall covered with bridles, bits, racing silks, blinkers, leather lead shanks and girth pads made him realize his aloneness. Where was Monk? Max should be back from the track. Why wasn't Dan yelling at somebody? Victor knew every piece of racing equipment that hung on the wall, where it came from, what it fit, how much it cost. But all of sudden, he couldn't remember what should be hanging on the empty nail, only that *something* should be. The fear grew. His universe was out of order.

Something grazed his left leg as if a small hand brushed lint from his pants. Victor tried to stand, but the movement took his breath away and caused great pain. Dizzy, he fell back on his cot. What was touching him? He had to know.

The calico cat that Storm Strike had kicked into the shit pile yesterday jumped onto the cot and sprawled across Victor's chest. He looked into its eyes and saw nothing. "Get off me. Get off I say." The cat licked a paw and stared straight ahead. Victor had seen those vacant eyes before. Where? Where had he seen them? The image of his grandma's face crossed his mind. She laid in bed the morning before he'd run away so many years ago and spoke through a box that looked like an electric razor held tightly against her throat. The words came out like they were coated with helium. "Too much gin and too many Camels. I ain't the same since they cut out my voice box. Won't be around much longer." When she stared, it wasn't at Victor. It was through him.

The cat's gaze held the same dazed emptiness. Sadness consumed him like the

morning fog that came off the Ohio River. Victor shuddered. The cat leapt off his chest and onto the floor. An enormous weight lifted, carrying the pain in his arm away. The sick feeling dangled at the top of his stomach and he wanted to scream it out. All he could do was gasp for air and wipe the cold salt water from his cheek.

“Victor, bring me a tongue tie for Storm’s bridle,” Dan stuck his head in the shadowed tack room and yelled, “I don’t want to forget it later.”

Victor realized the bare nail had held the racing bridle. Slowly, his world came into focus around him. Everything was right and in a few hours he would be standing in the winner’s circle with his big horse.

“Hurry up Victor Goddamnit. Max is coming up the road with the filly and I sent Monk to the tack shop.”

He watched the rider and horse walk slowly toward him as he moved out of the tackroom and down the shedrow. Both Max and the mare held their heads down as if the sunlight rested a heavy hand on their necks. Victor never thought about a family much. He had Storm Strike to take care of and he had Dan to take care of him. But if he had a real family, Max could be in it. The young man sure was smart and wasn’t afraid of anything, except maybe a little afraid of himself sometimes. Wasn’t he a war hero, even though nobody ever talked about it? Couldn’t he stay on the back of a rogue stallion when other riders bit the dust? Didn’t he always have a few extra dollars to loan Victor for beer? Most importantly, Victor knew Max could be trusted in a tight spot because Max had the look of a man who’d been in a few scrapes himself. He rolled a cigarette, placed it between his lips, and without lighting it, dropped the tongue tie Dan asked for across the bridle. He grabbed the filly’s halter, ran out of the barn, and waited

Chapter Nineteen

The mare stood still, swatting a few flies with her tail as Victor washed her. Max practically dragged her around the walking ring to cool out after her bath. On the third lap, she began to sweat again. Stopping by her water bucket, he let her drink a few swallows of the electrolyte-water mixture. A huge cockroach crawled from beneath a hay bale. Unbothered by the man and animal towering above it, the bug poked around a few grains of electrolyte powder that someone had spilled earlier in the morning. Arrogant bastard, thought Max. It knows that even if I squash it under my boot, all its cousins will survive. It knows that if a goddamn atomic bomb falls on this racetrack today, its life will be much the same tomorrow.

The human mind resembled a cockroach. The brain didn't look like a cockroach, but the mind, that invisible part of the brain that makes everything else in the brain work, Max imagined clearly with six legs and two long feelers poking around behind his eyes, looking for somewhere to hide from time. That's the key to being a cockroach, surviving any circumstance. For instance, during the Tet Offensive in '68 the squad got caught in crossfire between NVA regulars and a Huey gunship flown by some Army cowboy. The whole encounter lasted less than two minutes. Yet Max's mind slowed the motion of death down so much it seemed like hours passed while he gathered his thoughts, dove to the ground, rolled behind a rice paddy dike and fired a green flare warning the pilot and his mini-guns off.

Now, instead of slowing chaos down, his mind sped sameness up, adapting to the excitement of the upcoming race. He knew this ability somehow kept his brain from exploding and he was thankful. The routine of this morning flowed along the way it did

every morning seven days a week. Nine more horses in the barn needed exercising and Max galloped them all efficiently. He helped Monk and Victor walk four more for thirty minutes each. When it came time to strip Storm Strike's stall, it was Max who braved the big horse's race day playfulness by walking him around the levee on a long lead. He dodged the front hooves as Storm stood on his hind legs and boxed the air, snapped the chain across the horse's nose hard when Storm lifted his massive rear quarters off the ground, jumping in frustration at being controlled. They both snorted, scaring the birds that dared to land and search for undigested grain in horseshit.

After the horse was safely returned to his barren stall where he would wait for his call to the paddock, Max sat down with Dan and studied the past performances of the other horses in the race. The field came up short, five horses total. Most of the other trainers at the track knew Storm Strike would be difficult to beat. Other races at other times, though offering less purse money, offered less competition. They would wait for those. Max thought the reasoning sound. He'd once read a quote from hall of fame trainer "Sunny Jim" Fitzsimmons. Some reporter asked the old man the best way to win horse races and the old man replied, "keep yourself in the best company possible and your horses in the worst." It made sense. Of course, Max knew that for most of the old hardboots at this track the first half of the equation was nearly impossible.

"It looks like the Racing Form doesn't give any of these other runners much of a shot," said Max.

"This is print. The real thing always comes up full of surprises," answered Dan.

"I only see one horse that can run with Storm."

"Native Son?"

“Yeah, and he looked real sharp when Sherry ponied him Thursday morning.”

Dan lit a cigarette and spoke deliberately, staring at the ceiling instead of Max.

“He’s got a bad knee, but a lot of heart. Devereoux will probably try and stay right off of Storm’s early pace and close at the quarter pole. I need to tell Fernandez not to push our horse too quick. If he uses him up, there won’t be any kick left, especially after than little run off yesterday.”

Max felt his cheeks flush. The reference to yesterday’s episode on the track was a reference to the possibility of sloppy work. Max wanted to be professional, not sloppy.

“What about this horse in the number four slot, Tiger Warrior? He’s a late runner and he’ll be closing on Native and Storm.”

“He’s not good enough to get there, unless the other two simply wear each other out before the stretch.”

Max left Dan pacing the tack room floor and worrying about a late run from some horse that could cost them the race and the thirty thousand dollar winner’s share of the purse. Jose Fernandez rode well and Max liked him. The jockey kept himself fit and gave every horse his best effort. Max was glad Dan decided to give him the mount again. Jose won a race on Storm at Churchill Downs about three weeks earlier, but had made Dan angry by telling him the horse wasn’t trained into the race correctly. Tact was not the little Cuban’s long suit. Sometimes Max wished he could lose another twenty pounds and ride races. He had never been lighter than a hundred and forty pounds in his life though and the drugs he would have to take to lose the weight and keep it off would weaken him too much to ride.

By noon the barn settled into silence, except for Monk’s old radio softly playing

some Hank Williams song about whippoorwills and freight trains. The quiet rattled Max. Minutes began to seem like hours again. His mind needed a conscious focal point. He hung the saddle and the bridles used that morning on a tack hook and got a small bucket of warm water and a sponge. Taking the Murphy's Oil Soap, he slowly washed the sand and clay and sweat from the leather equipment. The soap on the leather smelled like his childhood. He remembered cleaning his ball glove every evening during his last Little League season. His dad demanded that type of commitment. Max led the league in hitting. Even now, twelve years later, he realized that a batting average of .431 was a tremendous accomplishment in any baseball league. But his dad never seemed to acknowledge what he did right. The fact that Max hit well didn't compensate for the fact that he fielded poorly, so he had to clean his glove every night and think about catching ground balls. Pressing the sponge, he scrubbed the saddle harder till it seemed as if his hand would push through the pommel. He had been a graceful hitter and hitting a baseball was something that should have been appreciated by his dad.

On the other hand, he had learned over the last few years to be hit gracefully as well. It required more practice to take a hit than be a hitter. Not everyone had to be a great athlete to hit well. Apprentice carpenters learned to pound nails and build homes. When he was in college, he "hit" the books to pass finals. People won the lottery by hitting the right number. Not much in the way of grace or dignity or talent was required for any of those things. Being hit by objects out of his control *did* require those characteristics for successful living. A man who can't *take* a hit and grow from the experience had no hope of doing anything with life but existing through it. And, even though Max didn't always feel alive, he desperately wanted to live beyond existing.

His first memory of taking a hit came from the womb. He distinctly pictured his mother's head snapping back, nudged by a careless driver in front of the old Rexall Pharmacy. She waited in the Plymouth for his dad to buy some cough syrup when the crash occurred. It was December, 1947 and Max's mother was eight months pregnant. She always denied that he actually saw the event from the womb, but admitted that her neck was broken in just that way. Regardless of how he had received the knowledge, taking that hit taught him early in life to never assume a place of perfect security exists. When he was well fed, comfortable and sleeping soundly at night, he expected the blow.

At four years of age, Max rode his tricycle over a curb with his mouth open. Ordinarily, the ride or the fact that he had disobeyed his dad to make it would have been business as usual, but on this day he carried a cork gun in his hand. The tricycle tipped over. The gun barrel rammed into his mouth and snapped a front tooth off at the gum line. Max remembered being very graceful at the dentist's office through the blood, the noxious smell of ether, his dad's cursing, and his mother's crying. He still carried that grace and dignity with him in the form of a wide gap between his two front teeth.

Sometimes a hit made him question the very essence of being, of fate, of the nature of man and the existence of God. It was more difficult to maintain composure during these kinds of hits, but Max felt well trained and disciplined by life because of them. He thought of one such event as he carried the saddle and bridle back to the tack room and walked to the pony barn to feed his pony a cup of oats.

In January of 1968, he was walking point for his squad. The sun had set and daylight filtered through a gray curtain into night. Max hated this time of day then and he still did. It was like being held in limbo, waiting for something to rise up out of the

shadows and consume him. The rest of his men strung out in a long column and followed him along the edge of the tree line on the northern perimeter of the village. Suddenly, a huge firefight erupted a thousand meters ahead of them. It was the army base camp in the foothills. He stopped and watched the exploding shells shower down over the concertina wire like millions of fireflies. Helicopters circled the camp. Their min-guns firing so fast that, even though only every fifth round was a tracer, they seemed hooked to the ground by continuous beams of orange light.

When the small arms chatter slowed to sporadic bursts, Max moved across the trail toward the marketplace. Something stung his chest beneath the flak jacket that should have been snapped shut but wasn't. He slapped the hot spot. A spent bullet, mangled by the time and space between him and the Army camp, fell from his hand and into his palm. He was never sure whether gravity or an angel brought the spent bullet down in exactly the right manner as to do no serious damage. But, the significance of being struck by a bullet that was dying instead of killing stayed with him ever after. It always made him feel as if he were chosen for some special task still not understood. He felt protected and obligated at the same time. Life required tremendous grace and ability to carry that type of hit around every day.

The pony nickered as his cup of rolled oats hit the bottom of the feed tub. The race would not be run for three more hours at least and Max put two bales of straw together in front of the stall, making a good cot. He covered himself with a fly screen and lay down. The best part of every afternoon was the nap.

Chapter Twenty

A nap. A nap would be nice. But Victor had to get the ice into the tub and Storm's front hooves into the ice first. He heard Monk snoring already as he dragged the tub down the shedrow and into the front of the stall. Picking up the two bags of cracked ice that Dan had dropped off before going to the grandstand, he dumped them in the tub then filled the tub with water from the hose. Storm waited patiently in the back of his stall. Victor thought the horse really liked getting his front legs soaked. Not only did it feel good, but also it was a signal that a race was coming soon. There was a time last fall that Doc Tandeni thought the horse might be developing some arthritis in those little bones around the coffin bone in the foot. What did Doc call them? Navy something. Navicular bones. He called them naviculars. Hell, that was some kind of fancy name for the wing bones on the coffin. How come people didn't just call things what they were?

Anyway, Victor put some kind of drug powder in Storm's feed every day for several weeks. What was the name of that shit? Arquel? And the boss had him soak Storm's front hooves in ice after the horse galloped each morning till there was no lameness when they came back to feed at night. That's what made fixing foot problems so hard. You couldn't see or feel inside the hoof. Sometimes horses didn't even get sore and lame till hours after the training was over. And then, how you going to keep a foot bandaged when a horse stands on it all the time? Finally, whatever caused Storm's soreness went away, but every race day since then Victor brought out the ice tub just to make sure it didn't come back.

When the water reached about three-quarters of the way to the top, he shut the tap off and led Storm forward. Raising the left leg, he set it gently into the water and ice. The

horse was so accustomed to this pre-race ritual that he stepped in the tub with the other leg on his own. Victor cackled.

“You’re ready. Yes sir you’re gonna show these other nags nothing but assholes and elbows today. I’m gonna wake that dumbass Monk up and make him buy another 12 beers to celebrate.”

He snapped the horse’s halter to the tie chain, not that it was needed because Storm had already dropped his head over the webbing for a nap. Victor stroked the long nose and tickled him behind the ears. He pulled up a lawn chair, sat down, and stared across the infield toward the grandstand. The people seemed like little ants as they hustled from the parking lot to the betting windows. The horses in the first race had already been called to the paddock and he watched the grooms walk them through the gap along the outside rail. He sat in a great spot to see the races. He had two cold beers in the ice tub next to Storm’s feet. The sun was high and life was perfect.

Within twenty minutes the first race roared out of the gate, which had been placed at the six-furlong pole directly in front of Dan Wilson’s barn. Victor saw a blur of colors, heard the bell, the jockeys chirping, and the crack of whips. He felt the ground shake beneath his lawn chair. The slight smell of rubbing alcohol and the excitement in his chest as the horses roared by made him reach into the ice for a beer. His left arm tingled and he leaned back in the lawn chair. The loudspeaker blared out the names of the first three finishers in the race, but all he heard was static and the slight hum that followed. He began to watch the heat rustle in waves across the track like cellophane. The sweat, heavy on his eyelids, pulled them down like window blinds. Inside the room behind the blinds, his mind walked around.

He struggled along a beach, which was kind of funny because he'd never been to the beach in his whole life. The white sand met the blue water and a bright sky seemed to hold them both in place, just like a picture. The beach, any beach, was the one place he'd never wanted to go and yet, here he was. The wet sand at the water's edge pulled his legs down and straining, he pulled them up with a sucking sound. The further he went, the more the beach rolled out before him. The scenery never changed, sand and water, the soft splash of surf, the suck of his shoes unstuck with each step. He heaved and panted.

He couldn't breath, so he stopped to rest. Thinking that maybe the water would be lighter, he waded into the surf. There was no one else, but this time the isolation didn't scare him. The further he waded into the water, the more he felt nothing except exhaustion. Small, clear bubbles floated around him. He reached down and picked up the nearest one. His hand seemed to almost go through it, like it was a big bowl of jelly. When he lifted it upward toward the sky, long string-like tentacles hung from underneath the mass of jelly.

He didn't know why, but the sudden need to bring the thing into him overwhelmed him. Standing in warm water up to his waist now, he gathered the creature into both hands and crushed it against his chest. A sharp pain ran through his whole body as the tentacles stung him over and over. Almost instantly the pain changed to numbness. The water closed over his head. He seemed to be drowning, but it seemed right. He felt like the one thing he had been reaching out for all his life was finally in his grasp. He could have started swimming, but he didn't know how. Then, he felt nothing, not even exhaustion.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Wake up, wake up. Oh God, you gotta wake up.”

A hand shook Max hard. He rolled off the straw bale in front of his pony's stall and jumped away from the sound. Instinctively raising his hands to protect his body, he stared into Monk's frightened eyes. The old groom looked horrified. Even his usual gray pallor was bleached white.

“What the hell's the matter with you?”

“Victor won't wake up.”

“He'd better be getting that horse ready for the race.”

“No, you don't understand. He won't wake up.”

The tremble in Monk's voice made Max nervous. He reached out and laid his hand on Monk's shoulder. “Slow down. You're not making any sense.”

“I'm telling you, I can't make him open his eyes. He's just sitting there next to Storm and he feels cold.”

When they got back to Dan's barn, Max accessed the scene quickly like he'd been taught to do in the Marine Corps. Initially, everything looked normal. The horses all napped in the afternoon swelter. Storm's head flopped over the webbing as he stood in his ice bucket and rested his nose on Victor's shoulder. Victor sat quietly, eyes closed, hands folded around a beer can in his lap. On the track, the John Deere tractor pulled the starting gate down into the mile chute, preparing for the next race. Some sweating horses and grooms walked by on their way back to the barns. Some walked by on their way to the grandstand paddock area. The loony cat perched on the concrete ledge in front of Victor and licked his front paws. Flies swarmed over the steaming muck pit. Everything

looked so normal and peaceful that Max knew it wasn't.

He couldn't really put his finger on what was wrong, but the small hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up. Adrenaline surged through his arms and legs. He felt his pulse quicken. If this had been the jungle, he would have expected gunfire any second. But he wasn't in the jungle. No. He stood under the slightly tilted eave of a one story wood and concrete horse barn and the barn stood with a long line of other barns on earth that belonged to some corporation in the state of Kentucky and the state of Kentucky belonged to the union of states that made up the United States. No. This wasn't the jungle. He knew exactly where he stood and as the smell of urine and clover hay filled his nose, he knew that no matter where he stood nothing was safe from decay.

Moving past the water tap and the coiled hose and down the center of the shedrow, he reached the little man quickly with Monk trailing behind. No blood throbbed through the carotid artery. No breath rattled the cellophane from the cigarette pack he held under Victor's nose. Storm Strike lifted his head quizzically, nuzzled Victor, and stared at the horses on the track warming up for the next race.

"He's gone ain't he," said Monk as if the word dead might make Victor's absence contagious. Max stepped into the stall and lifted the horse's legs from the ice. There was nothing to be done for Victor and Storm should have been taken out of the ice thirty minutes ago. The next race called would be the Governor's Handicap.

"Get the grooming box and get this horse cleaned up. I've got to hang his bridle on him and go to the paddock as soon as this next race is over."

"I can't."

"Damn it Monk. Don't be stupid. Victor's dead, probably his heart. *Move.*"

“I can’t look at him.” Monk trembled. Max thought the old man was going to faint.

“Sit down on that bale of straw and put your head back.”

He slid under the webbing and, raising his hand to Victor’s lukewarm cheek, thought the old man must have been dead no longer than a few minutes. Monk had said the body was cold, but obviously Monk had been too frightened to touch the skin. The book of Revelation, chapter 3 and verse sixteen flashed into his mind. *So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth.* Victor had been spewed from some god’s mouth. Not much of a revelation. Everybody gets spewed sooner or later. He looked at Monk.

“Got your wind back old man?”

“Yeah.”

“Then go to the guard shack and have security send the track ambulance to the barn. I’ll get Storm ready.”

Monk walked off toward the guard shack by the back gate. Max picked up a currycomb and began swirling motions on the horse’s coat. As soon as the comb hit him, Storm knew it was race time, bucking in the stall and nipping playfully at Max’s arms.

“Settled down big boy. Save that energy for the race. I want you to make some money today.” He worked the comb quickly, then a stiff brush through the mane and tail, then a soft brush over the horse’s face, shoulders, withers, and rump, then a cloth rag polishing the sleek coat like it was the finish on a Mercedes. Finally, Max lifted each leg, running the hoof pick over the soles of the hooves to clean away any dirt or manure. All the time he worked, Victor perched like some gargoyle against the barn wall guarding his

trust from some distant place now. Max talked to the body.

“Just like old times for me hardboot. I seem to work better with dead bodies lying around. How about that? Pretty sick, huh. Well, I always said my training in ‘Nam would come in handy. I’d like to feel something for you right now, but nothing I felt would help you and it certainly wouldn’t make me handle this horse better. Nope, you’re dead and I’m alive. That’s good for me and bad for you.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he started to cry. The tears didn’t stream, they just sort of swelled in the corners of his eyes. What the hell was he crying for? Victor meant nothing to him, an old drunk with a bad heart that finally quit. Hearts do that all the time. Sometimes they don’t quit, sometimes something stops them, like a piece of lead or the loss of blood, before they wear out. Red spots danced across the straw. He squinted. They disappeared, replaced by a sort of white blindness. The whole barn became a vacuum, void of sound. The fans stopped humming, the wind quit strumming the hay, the low wail of the radio disappeared. Then he heard a thump in the distance and another and another. Soon the thump became a steady pounding behind his eardrums. All the different sounds had been swallowed by the silence of Victor’s heart and emerged as the single sound of his own heart. He opened his eyes and looked at Victor. “You motherfucker, leave me alone.” Frightened, he ducked under the stall webbing and jumped into the middle of the shedrow. Out of breath, he sucked at the hot, humid air and held it inside momentarily as it burned his lungs. He opened a bottle of isopropyl alcohol to rub Storm down and keep the horse cool. The unmistakable smell of the colorless liquid made him lightheaded at first, then the smell transported him. Everything was white again.

Max was in a room, a place the Marine Corps made him go after he could move around with crutches. His wounds were healing nicely. The Company Commander at the hospital in Cam Rahn Bay asked for Max's help till his orders for light duty and a free trip to the States came through. The hospital had been understaffed since the Tet Offensive.

The room was frigid and fluorescent white. Eric Clapton's high-pitched guitar played in his head. The strings wound around Jack Bruce's words - *I'll wait in this place where the sun never shines - I'll wait in this place where the shadows run from themselves - In the white room with black curtains at the station* . He understood the sterility of the song. If not for the olive drab jungle fatigues on the other eight men in the windowless room, he would have sworn a mistake had been made. This was the snowy white South Pole, not sweaty Southeast Asia. It wasn't just the absence of color or the monotony of artificial light. The constant hum of the air conditioner and the dripping of a faulty faucet into the huge stainless steel sink entranced him. Every movement of his arms and legs seemed to be made by someone outside his body. He just felt numb. The scent of rubbing alcohol clawed its way into his nose and nested there till everything smelled like isopropyl. Max pushed the chair away from his desk and stood, turning to face the other men.

"How's everybody doing?" There was no answer from the others. He walked to the white refrigerator and opened it. "Lunch break. I bet the special of the day is Spam." Reaching around several bottles of clear chemicals, he pulled a square of wax paper from the top shelf. Spam wasn't his favorite but a little mustard made it edible. How nice it

would be to have his mom cook some fried chicken and mashed potatoes with a huge bowl of milk gravy. Now that was something that no mess cook could ever match, his mother's fried chicken. She was a great cook, even salmon patties.

He unwrapped the sandwich and sat on the edge of an operating table, which was already occupied by a pale man in his early twenties. The man's thin lips seemed almost purple to Max. He patted the left knee and asked. "Do you like spam? I'm not very hungry. I'll share my sandwich with you, if you tell me about the first time you ever got laid. What's your name, anyway?" The pale man's eyes were only half closed.

"Not talking, huh. Well, I don't blame you. Did you just come from Khe Sahn?" For an instant, Max swore he saw the lips moving. "Pretty rough, huh? Me, I got hit outside of Hue three weeks ago. I was lucky – million dollar wound. Shed a little blood, get a free trip home. Kind of like you, but not quite." Again, Max thought the head dipped slightly and the purple lips twisted into a strange grin. "They say shells fell like monsoon raindrops at Khe Sahn. They say Ninth Marines took a beating. They say you couldn't even leave your bunker to take a shit for fear of getting blown to hell. Of course, what happened when you guys proved you held the hill? Some fucking office poag general said the Corps didn't really need it and marched you off as if he just wanted to tease the gooks, as if he was curious about how much blood the ground could hold. Except it wasn't his blood was it." Max began to pace and chew his sandwich quickly.

"My orders for home should be coming any day now. I had less than a month to go when I got hit anyway. Hey, did I tell you about my buddy Rick. He caught one through the head the day he was leaving. How's that for luck, huh? I got a better one than

that. My buddy Jack Robinson choked to death on a chicken bone, a fucking chicken bone in the middle of an ambush.”

Moving back across the room to the refrigerator, Max took a can of Budweiser from the bottom shelf. One thing about working at Cam Rahn Bay, when the Air Force ran a hospital, they kept first class supplies on hand. He turned toward his audience.

“Late at night, holding my pillow I can almost feel it, you know, walking down off that jet into the airport bar in San Francisco, even on my crutches. Pale women with lips red from lipstick instead of betel nut are smiling at me. Hell, I can smell them. It's not the perfume. It's the soap. They smell clean. They don't stink like kerosene and black dirt and water buffalo.”

Max held what was left of his Spam sandwich in the face of the man next to him. “Okay, you don't want my sandwich. Who gives a rat's ass? Anybody else? Half a sandwich for one good fuck story. How about you?”

He slipped off of the table and walked across the concrete floor. The Marine on the other side of the room was smaller than the pale man and tanned a dark brown. Max stuck out the sandwich, but the small man faced the opposite wall. “Just take a bite. One bite. I hate eating in front of you guys. It isn't polite. Hell, maybe I just hate eating. Hey, you look cold.” He pulled a poncho liner over the man carefully. “You sure aren't a talkative bunch. But then most of the guys that come through here are pretty quiet. Although some lieutenant last week sat straight up once when I farted.” Max folded the sandwich back into the wrapper, threw it on the desk, and then took a long pull on the beer.

Was he completely fucking nuts? It was a thought that occupied a lot of his time lately. But then he read somewhere if you thought you were crazy, you had to be sane or else you wouldn't have thought you were crazy in the first place. Mostly, he just wanted to go home. He wanted out of the white room.

"Any greenies in here. How about you?" A dark man by the refrigerator caught Max's attention. He approached the man quickly. "January 6, 1968. Hey, you only been here six weeks. Just in time for Tet. How did you like the celebration? A lot of fireworks, huh? When I was a little kid, we lived across the street from the fairgrounds. Every Fourth of July, my dad and me would sit on our front porch and watch them shoot fireworks way up into the night. I really liked the Fourth. It was about the only time me and dad could sit and talk without fighting, unless we were at the horseraces. My dad loved horseracing. Did I tell you that? He dropped dead betting on a horse and the horse won the race. My dad always had that kind of luck."

Max laughed and the laughter echoed as if he were howling in a drainpipe. Walking from the table back to the desk he thought, if I don't get these eight forms filled out ASAP the Sarge is going to chew me a new asshole. When he sat and began filling in the top sheet with a dull pencil, the short hairs on the back of his neck tingled. They were standing up like little soldiers at attention. The pit of his stomach rolled over, like when his dad used to drive him to the ballpark before a big game and tell him how well he expected him to play and how disappointed he would be if Max fucked up. He wanted to cry, but he didn't. He felt like a child lost at twilight, facing the dark with no way home. Jumping from his chair, Max whirled around and faced the eight other Marines.

"You jerk offs. I know you're looking at me. Stop it. There's not a fucking thing I can do for you. You picked this war just like me. Leave me alone."

All of sudden the whole room was void of sound. The faucet quit dripping. The air conditioner shut off. A distant drumming began, a steady throb in his ears. The room was so quiet, he could hear his own heart beating. It kept pounding, pounding, pounding, and pounding. He wanted to scream. He did scream when a cockroach ran across the bread on his Spam sandwich. The bug didn't bother him, but its intense blackness shattered the balance in the room. The whiteness was gone. Everything was gone. The sound was gone, except the constant pounding. Another roach ran over the face of the pale thin man. The stillness was gone. The sound was gone. The stillness was gone.

Things began jumping everywhere. Crickets, spiders, more roaches, were jumping and running everywhere. He jerked his head left. Something was moving in the corner. What was it, a shadow, a gook, a ghost? He twisted his whole body right. The numbers on the calendar were re-writing themselves. Each five folded into a six. The eights collapsed into zeros. The dark Marine on the table screwed his face into smile. His eyes fluttered. A man on another table winked at him. The small tan man seemed to shiver. Max closed his eyes. The room stopped jumping and the men quit tormenting him, but even with his eyes closed, he couldn't keep the thoughts quiet. Those ideas that creeped into his consciousness almost every day now, the ones that blurred the line between what he knew and what he imagined, were loose again. They were loose and crawling around inside his clothes. He jumped and twitched. He beat his shirtsleeves with his hands and stomped his feet, as if his boots were on fire.

"You mother fuckers, leave me alone." He said it, but when he said it, he didn't know if he was talking to the thoughts or the men. "I got to calm down man. I'm getting too hyped. I got to get some sleep. I wish I was going home. Hell, I'd almost trade places. No, I would trade places with you."

A jet of hot air shot through the room and Max, already unbalanced, felt like he was tipping over. He became a tiny boat swamped by a tidal wave of invisible water. He grabbed the edge of the desk to keep from capsizing. In the doorway, surrounded by sunlight, stood an ugly man with a small scar on his upper lip. "Hey Sarge," Max said, his voice trembling slightly. Gunnery Sergeant Dixon, another wounded Marine waiting for orders home and in charge of the holdovers like Max, was making morning inspection rounds. Dixon was a career soldier with a shaved head and a faded tattoo on his forearm that read *Death Before Dishonor*. Dixon lived the words he wore and Max hated him.

"Are you talking to the stiffs again, you insane shitbird."

"Just eating some lunch and finishing the paper work."

"Tag 'em and bag 'em. The stateside flight leaves in an hour."

Max looked at the sergeant first as if the ugly man wasn't real, just part of a reoccurring dream that never ended, and then as if he were real but not human. Slowly, like a morning fog was clearing and the tree line beyond a rice paddy appearing, he returned to his desk and forced down a bite of Spam.

Slowly, he recapped the alcohol bottle. As he lifted his head toward the sun and closed his eyes again, the jumping in his mind stopped. The normal sounds of life returned.

“Hey buddy, what the hell are you doing?”

Max opened his eyes and the ambulance was stopped before him. A paramedic looked at his contorted face. “Are you okay? You were dancing around like a crazy man.”

“A wasp. I got a wasp under my shirt.”

“Let me help you.”

“It’s gone now. The body’s over here. Where’s Monk?”

“He’s gone to the grandstand to find your boss. What happened?”

“As near as I can tell, the old man had a heart attack or something while he was sitting here watching the horse.”

“Is that Storm Strike?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“The hell you say. Think he’ll win today? I’d like to bet on him.”

“He’s got a real good shot, but you know racing. You’ve got to always expect the unexpected. Hell, if I knew for sure what was going to happen, I’d be a wealthy man.”

The second paramedic climbed from the cab of the ambulance, opened the rear doors and pulled a folded stretcher out onto the road. The bell rang from the starting gate at the end of the mile chute. The race before Storm Strike’s began. By the time the race ended, Victor had been loaded. Two security guards and a small crowd, drawn by the appearance of the ambulance, gathered in front of the barn. Max felt better when he couldn’t see Victor anymore, but he was still shaken. He believed for an instant that some mysterious force must have been keeping him between two worlds without letting him live peacefully in either one. Had he really ever lived in either one? Which one was real?

Was he hiding the truth from himself? Was he his own mysterious force? How did a person hide things from themselves? Did they dig a hole in an unused corner of the mind and cover the memory like a dog covers a bone? He read somewhere that humans only used ten percent of their brain. That left a lot of space unaccounted for. What else was buried there?

One of the grooms from another barn offered to keep an eye on the horse while Max went back to get his pony. He put the racing bridle on Storm, made sure the bit was set right in the mouth, and tied a simple knot in the reins to keep them from dangling. Dangling was a bad thing. His thoughts about Rick Santos and Jack Robinson and Tri's widow dangled... Victor dangled somewhere in some other world... Max's feelings for Sherry dangled between lust and fear... Dan dangled over the abyss of anxiety, wondering if Storm Strike could win his race... Monk dangled all alone... Everyone he knew or had known dangled at the end of some cosmic string, but he wasn't sure what the other end of the string was connected to. They laughed and danced on their strings as if they had control over their own destinies. In reality everyone just dangled. Somehow the idea that he didn't have to control each circumstance in his life, no, the idea he *couldn't control* it, became strangely comforting to him.

The groom pulled Storm from the stall and handed the horse to Max, who hooked his leather lead through the D-ring on the bridle. At first, Storm walked beside the pony quietly, rubbing his head against Max's right leg. Did this animal know Victor had died in his presence? Max wasn't sure of the answer, but Storm Strike and Victor certainly seemed to have had a kinship that went beyond horse and stable hand. By the time they got on the track, Storm had raised his head. His ears pricked at the sound of other horses

being led past him. He started to prance, a little at first, but within a few hundred yards he looked like a horse floating on air and was hard to handle.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sherry reached the paddock with Native Son just ahead of Tiger Warrior and Storm Strike. The other two horses in the race were already in their saddling stalls with their trainers, grooms, and owners. As she rode up she saw Peaceful Night covered with sweat and pawing the ground with a front leg nervously. Sporting Chance, another long shot with a lot of early speed, stood quietly while his groom removed protective bandages from all four legs. Ponies weren't allowed in the paddock, so Sherry had previously arranged for a Mexican boy named Juan to hold Native Son as she saddled him. Juan came through the grandstand gate and onto the track. Sherry handed him the lead shank. He led the horse off and walked him around the paddock ring. Barbara, who ponied Peaceful Night, held Sherry's pony as she dismounted.

The crowd excited her. This was a big day at Ellis Park. Kids ran back and forth between the grandstand and an ice cream vendor, holding balloons and screaming with laughter. The crowd around the paddock studied the horses seriously. Cigar smoke and the smell of draft beer filled her nose. An old man sat on a green park bench and stared at his rumpled program. Young women, tanned and smiling, leaned against the rail waiting for the jockeys to come out. The four other trainers entered through the paddock gate and nodded at the security guard as he checked their badges. She saw Monk follow Dan Wilson in and wondered why he seemed so pale and sad.

"Hi Dan. Good luck today."

"You too Sherry."

"It's already been a real bad day. He's dead," said Monk.

The blood rushed to Sherry's head. She felt her cheeks flush.

“Who’s dead?”

“Victor. Max said his heart gave out.”

“It’s got to be some kind of omen.” Dan spoke as he kicked at the gravel.

“God, did you find him Monk?”

“Yeah. I woke up earlier this afternoon and he was just sitting there with Storm peaceful as a baby, holding his last can of beer.”

“Go get our horse,” Dan said.

Sherry saw Max rein his pony in and pull Storm to a stop. The horse was alert and curious, watching a bird flit around some spilled popcorn. When Monk took him from Max, he shook his huge head and pranced into the paddock, stopping long enough to let the paddock judge lift his lip and read the identification tattoo. She knew the horse was on top of his game. The work yesterday didn’t tire him near as much as Dan thought it might. Her horse, Native Son, was going to have a tough time winning this race.

If only humans could stay on top of their game. Sherry felt the ache in her arms and shoulders grow more intense now that there was nothing to hold on to, now that Juan was walking her horse. All morning she had pulled against one thing or another and as long as the tension held, the ache went unnoticed. That’s why she worked so hard on the track every morning. A fit horse tugged at the lead strap all the way around the track and, as long as the pressure existed between her pony and the horse, she remained focused and stable in the saddle. Maybe that was the message her brain was sending her now. There’s no escape from pain if you have nothing to hold on to.

Sherry wanted to hold Max. She watched him squirm around on the pony. Even from the distance his eyes seemed shiny and impenetrable. Something in Max had

hooked onto something in her. She had no idea what it was, just that it existed, but she knew that Max thought the exact same thing about her. She could tell by the way he avoided her gaze.

The horses all stood in their saddling stalls according to their numbers when the valets entered carrying saddles, numbered saddlecloths, and whips. Sherry, Dan, and the three other trainers worked quickly, saddling the horses, checking the bridles, and removing protective bandages from valuable legs. The noise level rose outside the paddock as the crowd anticipated making their bets. The anxiety rose in the paddock as both horse and trainer sensed that everything in their lives came down to the next few minutes. Five jockeys strolled around the corner from the jock's room and stood by the trainers, waiting for orders.

"What you going to tell me, chere?" said Manny as he pulled up the left flap on his saddle and re-checked the girth.

"What have I ever told you about this horse that you listened to? His knee feels tight and he moved good coming over here."

"I got a chance to win this one baby girl. All I gotta do is lay back off Fernandez and let him wear Storm Strike out early in the race. I know this horse's got one more good one left in him."

"Don't forget that Tiger Warrior will be waiting on you both. He's got a strong closing run."

"But we got the class."

The state veterinarian walked by and examined each horse for unreported injury. The paddock judge followed close on her heels and called the horse's number as a signal

for each rider to mount. The trainers “legged up” their riders and the grooms led the horses out of the paddock to the waiting ponies. Sherry had to hurry and mount her pony before Juan got Native Son out on the track. Manny adjusted his stirrups while she took the horse from Juan and began the warm-up drill. Native pricked his ears and bucked once when the bugle player blew the call to the post.

The heat seemed to rise from the track surface with small hands. It pulled her down and she felt heavy and slow as she paraded Native Son by the crowd. She worried about the race and her horse’s bad knee, about Max and the death of Victor. She waved at small children with their faces pressed against the fence and squealing with delight, and then worried that she might never have children, and if she did, how could she raise them on the racetrack? By the time her pony passed the grandstand and broke into a slow canter with Native Son, the noise from the crowd became a slight hum inside her head. The other horses were in front of her now and her father yelled over the thump of hooves and the whistle of wind.

“Slow down. I want to jog him and see if he’s pegging his leg.”

She pulled back on the pony and both animals slowed to a jog – one-two-three-four- a metronome with eight legs. The only metronome she’d ever seen sat on the top of an old upright piano in their first real home when she was five. Her mother wanted Sherry to learn to appreciate music and art and to be refined. Well, her mother was off refining the art of adultery and her father was beside her refining the art of self-delusion. Sherry had learned to appreciate one thing from them both, thoroughbreds. An honest racehorse was worth admiring because you could trust it to do one thing consistently and fully, run for the wire. A horse would carry you on its back anywhere you wanted to go.

People just let you dangle.

Her mother left her dangling in the flurry of a changing world and her own changing body. All she knew about sex and life was the fact that they might be one and the same thing. When she had gotten her first period, it was Manny who had to be questioned. Her mother kept busy with other things. He was in the middle of a poker game and she remembered how confused and hurt she felt when he laughed and told his drunken asshole buddies, "My little filly's just become a mare, but I better not catch one of you riding her... anytime soon, anyway." Sherry dangled for a year after high school, the year her mother ran off with the pari-mutuel clerk. Sherry wanted to go to college and her mom promised to mail tuition money every month. The first check had never arrived. Her mother promised her a lot of things over the telephone, but never seemed willing to give her anything. She got an offer to work for a good stable in Hot Springs, Arkansas at Oaklawn Park, as long as she was willing to sleep with the trainer while his wife was away. He was a handsome man and the job was a good one, but Manny dangled a trainer's license in front of her instead. He needed her to take care of Native Son, he said. Hell, he made all the decisions. All she did was work. And Thursday night even Max left her dangling. What kept him from taking her when she wanted to be taken?

Life would certainly be simpler as a racehorse, even a crippled one. She wouldn't have to think about why other people did the things they did. She could just run for the wire.

Sherry stopped the jogging on the backside around the five-furlong pole and turned Native Son toward the mile chute.

The five horses, guided by their lead ponies, walked down the chute and circled

behind the starting gate. The official starter surveyed them all from his tower as his assistants took the horses away from the pony riders and loaded each one into the numbered metal cages. Peaceful Night went in smoothly. The assistant starter jumped on the metal framework and steadied the horse's head. The jockey riding him pulled his goggles down and readied for the break. Native Son entered followed by Storm Strike and Tiger Warrior. Atop her pony behind the gate, Sherry noticed Manny Devereoux check his saddle girth one last time. She saw Sporting Chance fight with his handler and back away. His jockey kicked the horse's flanks. Sporting Chance seemed very nervous and balked again. His shoulders were covered with thick white foam. Sherry hated fooling with speed horses. They were unpredictable and, when they washed out like this, usually ran bad. Suddenly she heard banging and screaming and turned her head to see Storm Strike rear straight up on his hind legs in the gate. The gelding was so long that the tip of his nose actually reached the top of the metal framework.

Chapter Twenty-three

Max watched Storm explode in the starting gate and couldn't believe it. He'd never seen the well-seasoned gelding act up in the gate before. As far as omens went this was a bad one, if you believed in omens. Coupled with the Victor incident, it might be too much bad luck in one day to overcome. The jockey Fernandez stayed in the saddle and the assistant starter checked to make sure none of the horse's legs were injured or cut. But what worried Max was the fact that whatever rattled Storm might prevent a good break. This was a huge animal with a voracious stride. Storm ran his best on the front end, reaching out and eating up the track.

Max didn't have to worry long. The jockeys all crouched low over the necks of their mounts. The horses all froze in expectation. The grandstand crowd stopped yelling. For an instant, Max heard only the whistle of a slight breeze in the ears of his riding helmet. The only motion was the flick of a pony's tail and the flight of the fly from the pony's rump. Then Storm Strike's handler yelled "okay" from inside the starting gate. The starter pressed the button. The bell rang, the electric doors sprang open, and the horses leaped away from the gate.

They broke evenly except for Storm Strike who got away very slowly, as Max had feared. Even the late runner, Tiger Warrior, broke ahead of him. Max heard the track announcer calling the race over the loudspeaker, but because of the distance to the grandstand, the words were muffled as if coming through wax paper. Anyway, he could see what was happening down the backside. The riders jockeyed for position as the racing field moved in a tangled ball of legs and tails toward the half-mile pole. Dirt flew from the horses' hooves, singing against plastic goggles, stinging the faces of the horses

behind and beside them.

Sporting Chance went to the front and opened up two lengths on the rest of the field. Peaceful Night and Native Son ran neck and neck, inside and outside along the rail. Tiger Warrior hugged the rail three lengths behind them saving ground before the turn. Fernandez stood almost straight in the irons holding Storm Strike back and toward the middle of the track. Why the hell doesn't he give him his head, thought Max? The horse can't run behind other horses. He needs the lead. Maybe Fernandez was worried because Storm broke so bad, thinking that by saving the horse on the backside there would be more run left down the stretch. The only problem with that, thought Max, lay in time and distance, like landing a jet airplane on a short runway. Would the horse run out of ground before he could catch the leader?

As the field passed the half-mile pole and rounded the turn, Sporting Chance ran out of wind and began backing up. Peaceful Night and Native Son, still running together like a team of plow horses, rushed by him. Manny urged Native Son slightly ahead of Peaceful Night. Tiger Warrior gained ground along the rail and Storm Strike coasted dead last. Somewhere between the three-eighths pole and the quarter-pole, the field of horses disappeared from Max's sight, hidden by the back of the tote board. Within a few seconds he knew the running order changed because he heard the crowd screaming and saw them stand. Native Son passed the tote board first. Peaceful Night faded fast. Tiger Warrior closed on the leader and just outside the final eighth pole caught him. It was a hell of a race but where was Storm Strike. Max felt sick to his stomach. The horse *did* overwork himself yesterday and now the race was blown. Dan would probably fire Max before the day was over.

Manny Devereoux and Mark Sanders, the rider on Tiger Warrior, were locked in a duel. Devereoux hand rode Native Son. The old stallion wouldn't respond to the whip and so Manny stretched out along his thick neck, sliding the knotted reins up and down his mane with both hands in perfect cadence to the thrust of each hoof. It seemed to Max as he watched that horse and rider were the same being, as if the motion of Manny's body lifted the massive stallion off the earth and gave him wings. Even though Max didn't like Manny, he respected an artist when he saw one working and he was happy for Sherry. He saw her standing in the stirrups on the pony shivering and clapping like an excited child.

Sanders was good too, real good. He had raised the whip in his left hand and cracked Tiger Warrior's ass at least six times in three strides, driving him up wedged between Native Son and the rail. Each rider could have reached out and touched the other. Max saw no daylight between horses. It was looking like a magnificent finish when the crowd rose to its feet again, clapping wildly and chanting *Storm Strike- Storm Strike- Storm Strike*. A huge, dark blur shot from the end of the tote board. Max couldn't believe what he saw. Fernandez and the gelding flew down the middle of the track unnoticed by the other two riders. Devereoux and Sanders might as well have had their mounts tethered. Storm Strike caught them about two hundred yards from the wire. In one jump Storm was past them and still accelerating when he finished first.

Everything happened so fast Max wasn't even sure that what he had seen was real. Maybe he was dreaming. No horse could run the last eighth of a mile of any race that quickly. He kicked his pony and followed the other ponies out of the chute to pick up the horses as they rounded the clubhouse turn. The jockeys stood in the irons, leaning back on the reins to slow their horses down. Max kicked his pony in the flanks. Moving

at a full gallop, he caught Fernandez and Storm strike midway down the backside of the track. Storm snorted and shook his head, trying to dodge Max's hand when he reached for the D on the bit to pass the leather lead line through it. The horse wasn't finished running. Max missed the first time, but made the exchange on the second and reined Storm in. Jose Fernandez gave Max control of the horse's head, fell back in the saddle and loosened his hold on the reins. The jockey was completely out of breath. His chest heaved and shuddered as he sucked hot air into his longs.

"God damn, what a ride," he shouted between gasps.

"What the hell happened out there," asked Max as he turned the horse around slowly and headed back toward the winner's circle for the picture and trophy presentation. "I thought you were done when the old bastard broke bad."

"Me too. He acted like he wasn't even going to leave the gate and when he finally did, I thought I was sitting on a fucking rocking horse."

"I never saw this horse run well anywhere but on the front end."

"I know, but all I could do was sit still. He wasn't going to be pushed. Then the damnedest thing happened. In the middle of the turn, he cocked his head sideways and looked at an ambulance driving out the back gate. The son-of-a-bitch took off like he was shot out of a cannon. I thought at first he was chasing the ambulance."

Max smiled and nodded. He didn't believe in mystic vibrations and Vietnam cured his romantic notions about miracles. But what he'd just been told reinforced his idea that some connection existed between all living things. When Storm Strike broke from the starting gate, he was looking for Victor because the horse had watched his body being loaded into the ambulance and it never came out. Victor didn't walk him to the

paddock, or hold him still while being saddled. The smell of Victor's Velvet tobacco never filled Storm's nostrils right before Dan threw the rider on the horse's back. Max remembered how reluctant the horse had been on Friday to be saddled till the damn cat showed up. It seemed impossible, but was the only plausible explanation for Storm Strike's bizarre behavior. When the ambulance drove past, maybe the horse understood that his friend was going away forever. And though an animal couldn't reason on the how and why of death, who was to say an animal couldn't live in the presence of death and feel the absence of a friend. Maybe the finish of the race was Storm Strike's only way to say goodbye.

Chapter Twenty-four

Big green chunks of glass, three standing and four lying at odd angles around them in the dirt – *dead soldiers* as Monk called them even though Monk had never seen a dead soldier - sparkled in the fading sunlight. Max noticed Dan's hand tremble slightly as the trainer poured the remainder of the eighth bottle into three plastic cups. The champagne tasted very much like vinegar to Max. He picked up one of the empty bottles and read the label – *produced and bottled in Paw Paw, Michigan, 1972*. Dan was nothing if not classy. Who else could find champagne less than a year old, made in a Midwestern state of the United States and for less than two dollars a bottle?

The day had been a roller coaster for all of them, except of course Victor. Max began to see death as a means of simplification. Tonight Dan and Monk would get so drunk they couldn't stand and in the morning, be sick. Tomorrow Max would be faced with another day of memories and possibilities. Sherry would hurry to her barn at sunrise and make sure Native Son could still walk. Doc Tandeni would fight his constant battle between conscience and money. All the jockeys, including Manny, would try and keep from getting broken up in a bad spill and maybe win a race or two. Bills would come due and horses would get ill or injured. It might even rain and flood the backside of the track. But in the city morgue Victor would just lie still and rest.

"A toast to Victor," said Dan and passed around the cups.

"A toast to Rick Santos," said Max.

"Who the fuck is Rick Santos," Monk whispered to Dan.

"Who the fuck cares. We just made thirty thousand dollars. May they both be in heaven a half an hour before the devil knows they're dead," said Dan.

Storm Strike rattled his feed tub as he finished the last of a good hot bran mash. A full belly and a bed of clean straw had replaced the finish line and Storm's personal salute to the memory of Victor. Maybe that was the best anyone or anything could hope for, a full belly and a clean bed. No. That couldn't be all there was to life. Max had to believe something more existed. Life had to be more than survival. It had to be survival with some intention to move forward, even if that movement was slow and in small strides. His best friend ever, the only friend who knew where Max was going and would be waiting for him when he got there, had maybe chosen to die rather than merely survive in stasis and in a world that didn't want him. Max didn't want to remember Rick Santos now, but he had to consider the possibilities. There were always memories and possibilities. Rick's face filled his mind. He clearly saw his friend place the rifle beneath his own chin and squeeze the trigger carefully, as if the trigger might bruise his finger. He clearly saw himself leaning over the body and screaming – *SNIPER*, then firing into the tree line at a ghost.

Was this a memory, one he had buried so deep in his mind that it was holding him painfully immobile between two different worlds? Or, was it just a possibility that Max's own fears had been refusing to let him face? Memories and possibilities. Who knew the difference? Did it matter? Death was the absence of forward motion. It didn't make any difference what kind of death it was, or how it came. Rick Santos ceased to move forward and then he died. His friend had chosen to remain a prisoner of his own actions after he killed the Vietnamese boy on the trail that dark night four years ago. Rick ceased to move forward from that moment and then he died. Now, Max felt faced with the same choice, except that what had been dying for the last four years was not his body. It was

something inside his body. He didn't know what to call it - a spark, a soul, consciousness, a psyche. All he knew was that whatever it was, it had seen and done things that were killing it and his body couldn't live without it.

Suddenly, Max didn't want to be alone. He wanted someone to hold him and acknowledge his humanity. No, he didn't want *someone* to hold him he wanted Sherry. Max walked away from his own barn and kept walking till he saw her.

"I'm tired," he said, sitting beside Native Son's stall on a bale of straw. "How'd the old man pull up?"

Sherry rubbed the horse's knee with her hands to increase the circulation before applying Uptite poultice and replacing the spider bandage. She didn't look at Max, but focused on the task at hand. Max loved her ability to shut out everything except what mattered to her.

"He started to nod on the leg a little after he cooled out and the adrenalin wore off. He was so excited about running neck and neck with Tiger Warrior, I don't think he noticed finishing second to Storm Strike. I hosed the knee down for thirty minutes with cold water. Between that and this poultice, it shouldn't swell too bad."

"Yeah, you're right. You know, Storm was so far out in the middle of the track and moving so damn fast that last furlong, I'm surprised the track photographer even got him in the picture. I guess your dad's unhappy?"

"Not really. He dreamed of winning, but reality told him his best shot was running second. He had me bet a two hundred dollar exacta with your horse on top and another fifty dollar exacta the other way around, just in case."

"Plus your share of the purse was ten thousand."

“That’s enough to keep us going for the next few months.”

“It’s funny, but I’ve been thinking about a lot of things I haven’t wanted to these last few days and I’m beginning to realize that, if we’re not afraid of living, life somehow seems to provide us with what we need to keep going.”

Max ducked under the webbing and into the stall. He ran his hand down native Son’s long neck and patted the stallion gently. He kneeled over Sherry, kissed the back of her head, and then sat down in the corner of the stall to watch her work. Her long hair spilled over her left eye and she smiled. He watched her slender fingers knead Native’s knee with a kind of compassion that only honest people possess, the kind of compassion that lets the soul flow outside the body and into something else, the kind of humanity that had been stolen from him by the fierce motionless of death.

Sherry’s nipples were hard beneath her white tee shirt and the way they pushed against the cotton cloth in expectation excited him. He thought about the river bank two nights before, the first time he touched those breasts and minutes seemed to dangle like raindrops on the edges of magnolia leaves. Max felt her skin tingle against his, even though they were ten feet apart. He knew that what he wanted was all of her, not her tongue or the soft tug of her two legs around his waist, but the will and the choices that had control of those things. And he knew he could finally move forward enough to have them. How long he could keep them didn’t matter.

Sherry finished working with her horse and scooted next to Max. She wrapped her arms around his neck and spoke softly. “Is that all we should expect from life Max, a way to keep going?”

“Sometimes that’s enough,” Max answered, and for the first time in a long time,

he cried.

Epilogue: In February of 1986, a note was found wrapped in plastic and placed at the base of the Vietnam War Memorial beneath the name of Navy Corpsman Richard Santos who was listed as killed in action during the Tet Offensive of 1968 in Thua Thien Province, Republic of South Vietnam. It was unsigned. This is the text of that note:

THE MEMORIAL WALL

*- Of what benefit to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says Jehovah.*

*I have had enough of whole burnt offerings and the fat of
well-fed animals; and in the blood of young bulls
and male lambs and he goats
I have taken no delight. - Isaiah 1:11*

1 - ARRIVAL

You said Quang Tri was quiet when compared to Detroit
on Saturday night, Rick. I, being corn fed, believed you.
“Quiet as an old whore’s bedroom,” you said,
until the first whistle exploded and spilled
a mouthful of Tiger beer down my chin,
spraying the bolt on my new M-16. You grinned.

That smirk calmed all the fears
born in a place where ten seconds was a lifetime.
We lunged into a bunker when the next shell hit,
puppy clumsy. Like kids playing football,
chasing a fumble, we laughed, tumbling into darkness.

2 - HALFWAY HOME

Rice wine burns, but opium numbs
and sears the marrow of conscience.
You once asked why I’d fired too far left.
The kid was pulling up his pants, an easy target
in the twilight. He reminded me of a robin I shot
with my BB gun, squatting, pecking the wet ground
unaware of my existence, or its own thin mortality.
I was ten then and crying.

Your smile froze after six months in that country,
hiding a heart hardened by a dozen firefights
and memories made from body bags.
Those eyes, glistening with assurance,
connecting us as brothers, barely flickered
through Thai stick smoke and a Dexedrine haze.
While reeking of white phosphorus and cordite,
you swore that only housecats should kill for pleasure.

3 - SHORT TIME

It seems Monsoons came each day those last weeks,
just to wash the blood away.
You said, "Some stains won't wash."

That's when I knew you were going home early.
The child's bullet -riddled flesh made you unholy,
and the shortest distance from Vietnam to Detroit
was blood atonement - your life for our sins.
When the shot popped, like a pricked balloon,
I realized you had fired it.
But, I screamed - SNIPER - to the corpsman,
so your parents could be telegrammed - HERO. stop.
Prying the rifle from your suicidal fingers, I thought,
you should have squeezed the trigger, not jerked it.
A clean headshot, instead of my right palm,
could have closed your eyes.

4 - AFTERMATH

We both flew home as casualties,
you in your rubber bag, and me in my mind,
but your death denied me absolution all these years.
Did you take the easiest way out, Rick?
The dirt that covers your body now
still fills my mind.
Each time I reach for some prayer
to chant, some Eucharist to swallow,
to understand your sacrifice, to bring sanity
inside the empty sound of a spring rain, I gag.

Here, in my kitchen, drinking cheap whiskey,
like my mom sent us years ago in shoe boxes,
I grasp for some boundary.
Are you really there, Rick, in Washington, D.C.
on a black stone filled with the faces of letters
and the tears of your children unborn and unnamed?