

BY WHAT IS SURE TO FOLLOW

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This book is dedicated with admiration to all Veterans from all eras—most notably Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan—who are struggling to be normal again, with psychological wounds from their war that have never healed completely. Also, to their families, friends and brothers-in-arms who help them daily to be normal Americans again—no matter how long it takes.

I also dedicate the book to my wife, Valeri, who for nearly forty years has helped me heal and be normal again. Without her love and support, the book would have never been written.

I would be negligent if I failed to express my sincere gratitude to the numerous Vet Centers across the nation who welcomed me into their group sessions when I was in need as I traveled for work. Thank you to all who attended those sessions for listening to my babble and for your love and support. It helped me to heal.

I would also like to thank the many Vietnam veterans who helped me get the military details right in my head as I wrote this so long ago and for their support along the way. I am embarrassed to say that as this manuscript was intended solely as part of my healing process, I did not record names back then as I wasn't thinking of publishing the work. To those of you who contributed, I apologize and offer my sincere thank you.

“How can I tell that this calm around us is not just the center of the storm?” asked the young traveler, afraid to continue his journey. The old man smiled and nodded his understanding, knowing the importance his answer would have.

In due time, he replied: “By what is sure to follow.”

–*Unknown*

1

Winter 1989

ELEVEN FEARLESS MEN RUSHED FRANTICALLY FROM THE SMALL meeting hall, fleeing for their lives. Until now it had been just another of the weekly self-help sessions they all had been attending at the San Diego Vet Center. Each man was a Vietnam War veteran, a requirement for joining this select group. It was the first self-help group formed at the center when it opened in 1975. In the past fourteen years since it opened every type of social and psychological condition had been represented. Some men came to put to rest a single event from the war. Others had more severe problems that spanned years of combat service for which they wanted help. Quite naturally the composition of this group had changed over time as more men came to the Vet Center. The less afflicted chose to form other groups where they had more in common. What was left attending this group attracted other hardened men of similar experience. The twelve men who attended tonight's meeting shared one experience in common: each had been a ruthless killer in the service of his country. By virtue of training and experience each man was fearless, not the type to run from trouble. But tonight they had all run.

Reluctantly they had attended these meetings for one reason: it was a desperate attempt to be normal citizens again. And these meetings generally helped. Tonight's meeting had unexpectedly ripped open the painful scars of their war. The mangled and deformed past had been exposed.

After years of near-silence at these meetings, former Force Recon Sergeant Luke Sims finally had participated in the rap session tonight. As usual, he had sat in one of the folding chairs that formed the tight circle in the center of the poorly lit room. All but one seat had been taken.

As the evening unfolded, Luke had waited until two other men spoke of their worries and concerns and sat exhausted in chairs to his right. Then it was his turn. Massive amounts of sweat instantly soaked his clothes as he prepared himself. The heavy smell of his body odor spread across the room like the stench of death. He ignored it. Even though the sweat must have stung his eyes and blurred his vision as it flowed downward from his now wet-looking head, he continued to ignore it. His breathing increased and his chest began to heave. His rugged, good-looking features changed rapidly as stress knotted the muscles in his face and his nostrils flared. His normally intelligent eyes seemed to recede slightly into his head and glaze over. And then came the blasting fury of words; the first of these, spoken in a tone only another hardened Vet could comprehend, instantly catapulted everyone back into the perilous Vietnam of their youth.

“Saddle up, you puke faces! Lock and load,” barked Luke as he took command. His words shook the room, bouncing off all four walls.

Each man instantly tensed as adrenalin pumped involuntarily into his system, and without thought reflectively reached for a weapon that was not there.

“Listen up! Tonight we’ve got a serious mission,” he said forcefully as he quickly stood and moved to the center of the circle. The eerie unearthly tone in his voice shattered their minds and images began to whirl faster and faster in their heads. All eyes remained riveted on him. Muscles in his neck and face bulged further as fury pumped blood to his brain. “Don’t doubt me!!” he said in a tone each man painfully recognized as emanating from a dealer of death. “Some of you assholes will die tonight!” He began to pace slowly back and forth in front of them, staring hard into each man’s face before he continued to the next man. Sweat pored off his

face as he moved, leaving a moisture trail on the floor as he slowly moved.

Luke's dream world had become real for them all. Rushed breathing filled the room. Unable to move, the mesmerized men remained seated in the small circle. No one spoke. They waited, muscles pulsing, awaiting orders.

Time slowed; their senses raced to calibrate their minds to the threat at hand. Tension mounted swiftly in the now crowded, stale room, becoming palatable at first then quickly becoming a screaming silence. One man to Luke's left licked his lips constantly with his nervous tongue. No one noticed.

Luke's expression hardened further, finally matching the impaling force emanating from his heaving, muscular body. His eyes now began darting madly from man to man, piercing each completely, reaching the primal man within.

"I see fear in your faces! Good!" he hissed, spraying saliva several feet in front of him. "You had better fear me more than Mr. Charley!" His next words started as a low rumble and quickly gained gale force: "If every one of you is not saddled up and down the fuckin' trail in the next thirty seconds, I will end your fuckin' fear right now. Permanently! Got that shitheads? Now move out!!"

An explosion of movement erupted. Men shoved their way past each other as they fled out the single narrow doorway, and in a blur of motion the room was empty, except for Luke. He stood silent amid the scattered chairs, heaving to gain oxygen. Listening, he heard the door down the hall close loudly for the last time. The rancid smell of fear clung to everything. He tasted it in one long inhale of breath; he could also smell urine mixed with the fear, somewhere in front of him. His right leg began to shake involuntarily. Finally, he closed his eyes.

Quiet. As though it had been drained through a release valve, the tension left his body. He felt weak. Slowly, almost stumbling, he took three small steps to one of the folding chairs. He sat down hard, devoid now of all the power he had commanded just minutes earlier.

Silence. Minutes passed without a sound.

"You sure know how to end a session early, Sims." The

unmistakably strained voice came from the back of the room in a darkened corner. Luke did not move or answer.

“I can’t believe what I just heard,” continued the voice. “I read about that look of yours—the one that got you the nickname Eyes. Now I know why you got it. You scared the shit out of me and everyone else here tonight,” said Randall Rinke, the group’s V.A. counselor, still cloaked in the shadows. “You were, we were, back in Nam with you just now. It was real. And that look in your eyes. I can’t say that in four tours in Nam I felt fear so totally as I just did. You scared everyone tonight real bad, Sims; real bad, me included. And I would have never dreamt that some of those big guys in the group would have been afraid of anything.”

The counselor studied Luke for a moment before speaking again. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you, Sims?” Perhaps a full minute passed before the reply came.

“All I wanted to do was get some of this crap out of me, let them hear it. Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? I mean week after week I hear them let loose with their shit,” said Luke softly, now very unsure of himself, sounding almost like a small child as he continued. “Why is it all right for them to say their piece and not me?”

“It’s not what you said but how you said it. You were there again NOW, right NOW! And you took us all with you. The emotions, call it energy or whatever, was so strong you jolted all of us. At one point I felt certain we would all be dead in the next instant—and there was nothing any of us could do to stop you! Until tonight I would have told anybody that I could never feel like this. I’m just now getting calm after that shit. Just like you, I’m ex-Force Recon Marine.” Rinke stopped talking. He shook his head disbelievingly, slowly lit a cigarette and began studying Sims again as he took his first few drags.

Minutes passed in silence while each man mentally regained his footing.

Finally, Luke nervously cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Luke said, sounding very sincere. “I just sort of lost it a bit, I guess. I’ll try to not get so carried away next week. Right now, if it’s okay with you, I’m going home. I’m exhausted.”

“Before you go, I’d like to ask you a few questions. Your file is a little sketchy and I’m new here.”

“The record shows that you served with 1st Force Recon in I Corps. When?”

“In ‘67 and ‘68.”

“What was the name of your team?”

“The Mad Dogs,” replied Luke mechanically.

“You were a member of the Mad Dogs?” Rinke said excitedly. “Boy! The stories I heard about you guys. You guys are a legend in the Corps. You guys had pure magic—you could walk through a forest unseen—invisible. I heard that you made it a habit of going into areas way up north where other teams had just vanished. And you came out with valuable reconnaissance—the good shit—without so much as a fuckin’ scratch. Everybody talked about you guys,” said Rinke in a rush of words. “You were fuckin’ heroes. Even in boot camp they talked about you. I was in-country from ‘69 through ‘71. And they were still telling the stories. Are they true?”

“Yeah, I guess for the most part they’re true enough. We were lucky bastards,” said Luke with a weak smile.

“You keep in touch with the rest of your team?”

Immediately Luke’s body became rigid again. His breathing stopped for the longest time.

Sounding like the voice of an emotionally dead man, he finally replied. “All fuckin’ dead.”

To Luke it seemed like just yesterday his team had been killed, victims of a barbarous VC massacre that he had escaped only by a chance of fate.

“Maybe I could have prevented it somehow.” He spoke softly, feeling the comfortable role of protector of his team surface again. He had said this to himself a thousand times, and each time it opened the same mental wound, festering, jagged and painful. Closing his eyes tightly to shut out the pain he knew would soon follow, he shivered involuntarily as his teammate’s faces emerged from his personal shadows. Each scowled at him through tortured eyes. Without understanding it, he knew he could never shut out the pain, no matter what he did. His guilt and emotions wailed up inside him.

“I let them down. Damn it. I didn’t know it would happen,” Luke said sorrowfully. His thoughts began to spin inside his throbbing head.

For a full minute he gave in to his emotions and cried silently. His head hung down in front of him. Then he pushed the thoughts from his mind, wiped his eyes clear of tears, sat up straight and then took a long moment to light a cigarette. The tension temporarily released, Luke was again in control.

“What happened to them?” asked Rinke persistently. Another long pause added meaning as Luke prepared to speak.

“VC sapper squad got them one night when I wasn’t with them.” Luke’s voice could hardly be heard as he finished. “It was routine perimeter duty.”

“Go on,” said Rinke as Luke failed to continue. Still Luke remained silent. “I guess we’ve talked enough for tonight anyway,” said the counselor in a friendly tone. “Go get some sleep.”

“Yeah, think I will.” Luke slowly rose and headed toward the exit.

“See you next week, Sims.” Luke did not reply other than waive his right hand slightly as he went out of sight.

Still seated in the deadly quiet room, an uncontrollable chill ran down Rinke’s spine. Then he quickly scrawled several notations on the clipboard in his lap. He ended with a note to schedule a psychological profile for Sims as soon as possible up at the VA Hospital in La Jolla.

Ten minutes later, Luke, feeling strangely at peace, entered his single bedroom apartment. The tension that had been building for days had finally been released. After taking a hot shower, Luke smiled as he slid in between clean sheets, hoping to fall asleep fast. Instead, he found himself in a half sleep, tossing and turning until finally he wasn’t sure if he was asleep or awake. Then his reoccurring dream world opened up.

2

AS HE WATCHED THE SCENE UNFOLD, WIND WHIPPED THE TOPS of trees overhead, ferrying huge mountains of misting clouds down to ground level. Then as suddenly as it came, the wind left, leaving dense ground fog pressing hard against the hillside in which he lay concealed.

Luke rubbed his eyes. He couldn't shake the feeling that something didn't fit, that something bad was about to happen in this darkened world. The feeling intensified with each minute. It began as paralyzing waves washing over him, jolting his senses, screaming for release. Now, after just a few minutes, it held him locked firmly in its devastating grasp as surely as a massive vise gripped a piece of carbon steel. Muscles used to great hardship felt numb as the pressure intensified.

Unable to concentrate, Luke lay motionless on the moist earth, staring blankly into the near darkness from his concealed vantage point. He wondered what made this damn mission any different from all the others. Sure, it was in enemy held territory—so what. Most of his missions had been in North Vietnam. This wasn't his first solo mission either. So what was causing this agonizing tension?

A strange foreboding, as though he knew the tension's cause, gnawed viciously at the back of his mind. This was turning out to be anything but a routine patrol. A physical chill washed over him. He looked down at his uniform; his faded camouflage fatigues were soaked from the waist down. He had relied on his poncho liner to keep out the light rain that had been falling all night. The poncho

only covered the top half—the rest was wet. He shook his head and wondered why he should notice wet pants anyway; they were a way of life during the rainy season.

As his mind continued to wander, he thought briefly about his camouflage; it was perfect. Everything about him blended perfectly with his surroundings. His face, thickly painted with a pattern of two shades of green, with reddish brown around his eyes, added the final touch to his camouflage. Anyone unfortunate enough to see it was treated to a macabre sight. Luke's Recon team buddies had created the grease paint pattern before Luke's first mission into North Vietnam.

Luke glanced around the immediate area. Clumps of dense, dark-green brush covered the steep terrain. Dense foliage in front and behind him cloaked his slight silhouette—just as he had been taught in training so long ago. In preparing the site, he had scooped out the earth to make it a snug place to lie. To add comfort, he had then covered the area with soft green grasses and other material. Just in front of him a thickly leafed bush had been thinned at the base for viewing.

As if to reassure himself, he slowly touched the equipment spread in front of him: within easy reach to his right side, his field glasses, rucksack and M-16 rifle, with several magazines of ammo, were exactly positioned for fast retrieval and use. He nodded his head, satisfied with his readiness. Places like this were a way of life for Luke since he became Recon. Once laagered like this, he could remain motionless for days, moving only occasionally to relieve himself, and then only rolling over slightly.

"Sonofabitch," he mumbled as he rubbed his right leg, trying in vain to massage the latest charley-horse into submission. "What's with me tonight anyway?" he said out loud. Even after the welt subsided, no matter how hard he tried, Luke couldn't get comfortable. A look of total repulsion covered his painted face. In a low whisper, he said, "Come on Luke. Get your act together." After several attempts, his concentration returned. He began studying the terrain below. Seeing nothing in the mist, he decided to rest his eyes briefly.

The images in Luke's head began to spin wildly; his thoughts

crashed into one another, leaving only half-heard echoes resounding in his mind, not enough to grasp. This had been happening more often lately. Each time it was more difficult to distinguish between the dreams and reality. Luke shook his head, rubbed his temples until the confusion seemed to pass; even then he was somewhat disoriented. Was the Vietnam War a dream, he wondered, and Stateside the reality, or was it the other way around—the war real and Stateside only a dream?

A ringing sound in the distance caught his attention. He turned his head slowly toward it. His mental fog slowly abated. The sound became known; it was the phone next to his bed ringing.

He reached for it.

“Hello,” he said in reflex as he put the phone to his ear. His mind heard unintelligible noise. He shook his head, and cleared his throat. The noise continued; slowly it turned into words.

“Luke, is that you?” the voice repeated.

“Yeah. Who are you?” said Luke in a daze.

“Rinke, Randy Rinke—down at the Vet Center.”

“Oh, uh huh,” replied Luke. He turned and looked at the clock. It was 9:40 a.m. He swung around and sat on the edge of the bed, still holding the phone but not speaking.

“Tuesday at 10 a.m...That’s the 17th. Can you make it?”

More silence as Luke rubbed his face.

“I took the liberty of scheduling you an appointment at the VA hospital, Luke. They need to do some more tests. After last night I think its best. As soon as they can see you is next Tuesday.”

After a slight pause, Luke replied, “Yea, I guess so. Let me get some paper and write it down.” Rinke repeated the date and time.

“Another thing,” said Rinke in a worried voice. “Could you come down to the center this morning? I need to fill in some history in your file.”

“When?” said Luke, now fully awake.

“As soon as possible. I’ve got a full schedule this afternoon.”

“Okay. I’ll take a shower and be there in about thirty minutes.”

“See you shortly,” said Rinke as he hung up.

Luke still held the phone in his hand as he realized both he and

his bed were soaking wet. He took a deep breath, more a sigh than anything else. He wrinkled his nose; the pungent smell of his own sweat assailed him head on, and he remembered. The dream.

* * * *

“You still working at the university as a janitor?” asked Rinke. Luke was seated in the chair next to Rinke’s desk at the Vet Center. Bright sunshine entered the room from a window nearby.

“Yeah. Only four nights a week now,” replied Luke with a nod, happy to have a safe topic to discuss. “I work night shift, from ten ‘til about two in the morning. And right now I’m taking two classes during the day: Anthro 407 and Econ 302. The rest of the time I spend at the gym working out. They offer martial arts classes too so I’m able to stay in shape just as if I was in the service, or at least almost. Been doing that since I got out.”

“I wondered why the rest of the group last night looked, shall I say a bit out of shape, and you look trim and fit like you’re still in the service.”

“I’ve got nothing else going on so I go to the gym.” Luke flexed his arm briefly to show his developed muscle and gave a lame grin.

“I see. How long you been coming here for counseling?”

“Off and on since ’75 when they opened. Pretty steady for the last four or five years, I guess.”

“Your records show that for the first couple of years after your discharge you had outpatient status up at Balboa Naval Hospital. And then you were assigned to the VA hospital after it opened up in La Jolla. Is that right?”

“Yeah. I guess I was one of the first vets to get to see La Jolla when it opened. Nice place. Lousy service though.” Luke smiled slightly.

“Uh huh. Ok. I guess I’ve got the records straight now. Tell me about last night.”

“What’s to tell? Sometimes I remember. That’s all. Usually I’m alone when it happens. I just wait for it to pass. Then I’m all right. Last night you guys saw it. So...”

“Do you remember what happened?” said Rinke, deliberately in a soft voice.

“Sure. I just flashed on one of the scumbag missions we drew where we had to take a bunch of green grunts—cherries—along. It was a pain. That’s all. It was the first time I’ve thought about that shit since I left country.”

“You say you’re usually alone when this happens, huh?” Rinke spoke matter of factly. Then, while watching Luke closely, he scribbled a note in Luke’s file.

“Until this time I’ve always been alone,” responded Luke. He didn’t feel comfortable and tried to change the subject. “Maybe I should just layoff the meetings for a few weeks, Doc. You know, let things get back to normal.”

“I don’t know, Luke. I’m concerned about last night. What happened needs attention. That’s why I’ve scheduled the meeting with Dr. Sullivan up at VA. What do you think?” He stared hard at Luke.

Luke felt his stare and began squirming in the comfortable chair. Nervously, he glanced around the room. Seeing the effect he had on Luke, Rinke broke his stare by pretending to take further notes.

“They don’t do anything up there but talk,” Luke said loudly without warning. Rinke looked up with a jerk. “At least here I can talk to someone who was there. Someone who knows. That helps. If you say so I’ll go, but I think it’s useless.” Luke looked helpless, resigned to the ordeal.

“I think its best Luke, really.” Rinke put aside the clipboard in one smooth motion and softened his look. “Maybe they’ll prescribe something that will make the nightmares go away. Wouldn’t that help?”

Luke shook his head no. “I don’t think so. Last time the drugs made me into a zombie. Fuckin’ bad stuff.”

“That was several years ago, Luke. New drugs are out now. Maybe they can help.”

“I hope so,” replied Luke. “Anything that can help put the dreams into the past, I’ll try. I can’t stand the total exhaustion they dump on me afterwards. Yeah. I’ll go see the man.” Inside, Luke didn’t believe anyone could help remove the terrible dreams that haunted him.

Three restful nights followed his meeting with Rinke. The intervening days proved to be good also, resulting in Luke being in an exceptionally good mood. Even his boring college classes left him with a smile on his face.

On the third morning when he awoke, he found his mood dismal. He was again on edge for no apparent reason. During the remainder of the day, the stress mounted hourly. At work that night, Luke mechanically performed the cleaning chores required of him and was glad when quitting time came. All he wanted was another restful night's sleep. He felt exhausted. Yet as he entered his apartment, he somehow knew the rest he so desperately sought would be denied him.

To help sleep come, he grabbed a tall beer from the fridge. He downed it quickly as he prepared for bed. It was his usual method of sedating himself for sleep. Tonight it didn't work. Instead he found himself tossing and turning for what seemed like hours. Finally, as the darkened edge of sleep overtook him, his dream world consumed him once again.

ONCE MORE LUKE WAS ON PATROL. The night was unusually dark. Even though it made observations difficult, he studied the area in front of him. The moonless night had begun to fade with the slow approach of morning. Then, for no apparent reason, the darkness seemed to prevail again, refusing to give up control of the landscape. Typical monsoon season, Luke thought with a nod of his head. He quickly disregarded the soft patter of rain on his poncho liner and again began to study the wet landscape below.

Another storm had settled in, following closely on the heels of a drenching rain that had lasted for weeks. This storm too brought with it impenetrable low clouds, closely clinging to the hillside and the valley below. A fine, soaking mist enveloped everything in sight, adding more moisture to the already soaked landscape. He ignored the smell of mildew and rotting vegetation that filled the air.

Luke watched as nebulous clouds swirled slowly through the area on lost air currents, causing the dim early morning light to fade in and out. The result: strange and sometimes threatening images

appeared and disappeared, almost magically, as if they were real—when in fact they were nothing more than trees, bushes and their shadows on the lower hillside and meadow. For a fleeting moment, as the fog continued to roll amongst the trees and shrubs in front of him, Luke felt like he was viewing a lush park-like setting back home; then it was gone.

By anybody's standards it was a miserable morning—not even animals were stirring. Enduring the rain, however, was the easy part of the job that brought him to this steep hillside. Covered with thick vegetation and almost impossible to traverse, the hillside was the most unlikely place for someone to be, especially now under these conditions, but that was exactly why he was here. The hillside offered one major advantage; it was an excellent vantage point. One hundred and eighty degrees of terrain was easily in view; all movement up to 1000 yards or more was visible—at least on a clear day. Staring into the mist this morning, only a fraction of that distance was discernible.

Of the few trails that wound their way to oblivion a short distance up the hillside, all were in view far below. Luke nodded his head, as if agreeing that he had picked a good vantage point. Moving his binoculars further a field, several hundred yards to the northeast, he saw the mostly open grassy areas. On previous patrols they had looked almost like well-manicured lawns, they were nearly obscured by the fog, only portions of them were now visible. The main commuter trails, the ones used most often by the enemy, Luke noticed, were all in clear sight at the base of his hill. A smile slightly creased his lips.

During previous patrols, he remembered, especially on clear, moonlit nights, these same main trails had almost glistened like ribbons of concrete forming sidewalks back home. He had seen it often enough; heavily used trails in the less dense vegetation quickly wore down to sandy soil. The sand tended to catch the moonlight and almost sparkle. This morning, however, the cloud cover obscured the light. Luke then frowned, realizing it was going to take total concentration to make out the barest of detail in the rolling fog below him.

This was the perfect hillside for someone to use if they wanted to watch a wide area and not be seen. And that's exactly what Luke had

in mind. After all, as a Force Recon Marine attached to the First Force Reconnaissance Company serving in Vietnam, his assignment included watching grids like this for enemy troop movements and reporting his findings.

This grid was not new to him; his last eight or nine patrols found him right here watching this critical valley, sometimes from this hillside, sometimes from others, usually without much to report.

On several patrols recently, he had detected enemy movement during a night's surveillance. Twice he had felt no choice but to kill the lone scout who had gotten in his way. Yet another time, when an enemy soldier passed within inches, Luke never moved, and the soldier walked away unknowing. After all, Luke's purpose was to gather intelligence, not kill the enemy. Anybody who interfered with his mission had to be terminated. It was that simple.

So far tonight it had been very quiet. He hadn't seen any sign of the enemy. Sometimes that was good and sometimes bad. Then he shook his head no. "Something tells me tonight's quiet is bad," he said softly, spacing the words as he thought out loud. The words, spoken without emotion, sounded like a verdict. The feeling hung like a shroud upon him. He scanned the landscape again and again and saw nothing. But he knew it was there, menacing, just beyond his senses. His breathing became shallow; the strong, sinuous muscles in his powerful shoulders and neck tensed to near breaking point. His eyes strained as they pierced the fog with his lethal stare, carefully looking for anything amiss.

Long before he saw the proof, he mentally prepared for action, trusting that animal part of him which had saved his life many times since reaching Vietnam. He lay rigid as a piece of concrete, still in the prone position he had assumed many hours before. He ignored all the aches of strained and pinched muscles as though they did not exist. Luke tasted the faint breeze, breathing it quickly through both his mouth and nose, trying to catch a faint tell-tell scent or taste that would give more meaning to the puzzle.

He studied the terrain. Carefully he moved his eyes from left to right and back, squinting as he strained to detect even the smallest clue. Each bush was examined as it emerged from the fog, and he

continued watching as it disappeared, the soupy fog reclaiming it. Nothing; his nostrils flared as he came up empty. Charlie was out there; Luke was sure of it. He didn't know how many, or exactly where, but he knew.

"Settle down," he reminded himself ruefully. "Be patient, don't rush it. In time they'll show themselves. They always do." His prompting, done in a whisper, just barely reached his own ears. Instinctively, he ignored the sound of leaves in a nearby bush being thrashed about, knowing an early rising bird was in search of a meal. His concentration was total as he continued his vigil.

The proof he was seeking materialized within his brain's synapses with the power of a massive explosion. What caused the greatest dismay was the immensity of the situation; there in front of him, covering almost the entire field of view, countless enemy troops moved in and out of the misting, soupy fog. Their dark silhouettes were a stark contrast to the gray morning as they materialized from the dull whiteness. They were coming up the valley toward him.

Based on the numbers he could see, Luke felt sure it was at least a battalion of NVA. As the full impact of the scene sunk in, Luke tensed further; his breathing became even more shallow as he reacted physically to the threat. It wasn't the first time he had seen such a huge enemy force so close, but something about this bothered him.

"Shit. They're moving so slow it will take hours for them to get close... to be a real threat," he said aloud, now the cool professional once more. With that rumination he felt himself relax. He decided to sit tight and wait this one out—just as he had sat tight and let the enemy pass countless times before. He knew how impossible the terrain was between them and where he was, and he also knew from experience that Charlie wasn't eager to send routine patrols up into areas like this; the vegetation was so thick that it could take hours to travel just a few hundred yards, and it could tear a man's clothes to shreds within a few yards.

For some reason, though, a nagging thought persisted. He didn't think their movements looked routine. His quick mind began to make further sense of the sparse data. Out loud he said, "It's as if they know I'm up here." No emotion was contained in his announcement. It was

a simple, grating statement of fact. Watching a while longer, his scalp tingled and the fine hair on his neck bristled. He was sure of it. They knew someone was on the hillside. He continued staring through the binoculars at the spectacle far down below.

A serious look erupted on his attractive, but slightly gaunt face. Beneath the thick layers of grease paint, the muscles of his jaw grew taut. His eyes became hard as granite and his mouth went slightly dry. A slight smile creased the corners of his mouth. His mind raced over all the information before him. Checking the evidence again, he reached the same conclusion. “Charlie’s on to me,” he said in a confident, strong voice, speaking out loud as though there was no danger in being heard. Now he knew what he was up against.

My left tit’s in the wringer now, he thought. He knew that he was in real trouble. He took the field glasses from his eyes, wiped the lens dry, and thought further about his situation. Those damn choppers better come soon, Luke mumbled to himself. He knew he had to hold out until the choppers came. He needed to report this shit to the lieutenant.

With the moist binoculars still glued to his eyes, the worrisome thought slowly worked its way to the surface: It didn’t get any worse than this. With his Recon team dead there was no longer a reason to hide his fears—fears that had always been present, but had been carefully buried deep within himself, hidden from all his team mates. He only had thirty-eight days and a wake up until he would catch the freedom bird for Stateside. He wasn’t sure he even still believed Stateside existed any longer.

This far behind enemy lines Luke knew he dare not try to out run Charlie. He’d never make it. Besides, there were too many of them.

He knew that even if he wanted to run, he couldn’t. All he could do was do his count, take good notes, stay concealed and pray to God that the damn choppers would come in time. He wished he still had his team’s radio. Then he’d be able to call for help. It was times like this that made him feel most alive. Being a Recon Marine was the only thing that mattered in his life. It had been that way since the day he earned the right to wear the Recon’s insignia.

Luke watched the shadowy figures of the enemy narrowing the distance, now skirting the base of his hill. He remained calm; they were still a long way off—and they were in plain sight. It was a familiar game, a game of cat and mouse. He had played it many times, always he was the winner.

It's hard to tell who is the cat and who is the mouse without a program he thought to himself. His brow creased and his lips were drawn tight as he further studied the situation. With his right hand he made a quick notation in his small, green, military-issue memo book and then continued his surveillance. His gaze remained riveted down the hillside for some time.

Luke again felt the strange tension begin to consume him. He had felt the stress of combat many times, but this tension was different. Something told him it had nothing to do with the approaching enemy below. That thought alone increased the tension to an almost unbearable level again.

The waiting part of the life or death game he was involved in was the one part of his job he disliked most. Today was no different. Nothing he could do but sit and wait. He thought briefly about how he had gotten into the Marines in the first place. He smiled. Then he lost himself fully in the memories of the days leading up to him entering the service.

IT WAS A SUNDAY MORNING IN 1966. Luke was in his apartment in the San Diego residential area known as Kensington. A strange noise had startled him awake. As he looked at the clock on his dresser, his blurry eyes finally registered the time: it was 4:30 a.m. The sun wasn't up yet. He grimaced. As he lay on the bed trying to figure out what had woke him, his mind began to clear. The haze that had settled on him during the night gave way grudgingly.

He remembered last night—or at least parts of it—and how he had gone out drinking with a couple of buddies and really tied one on. Normally he didn't wake up until at least noon after such an ordeal.

As the mental fog lifted further, he realized it was his cat's continuing clawing on the nearby clothes-hamper wanting out that

had dragged him out of his slumber. On his second try, Luke managed to stand, although he wobbled slightly. Slowly he moved to the door and stood silently staring down at the cat through bleary eyes. With concentrated effort, he opened the door. The cat quickly scampered out through the narrow opening. Looking blankly at the still open door, it all came back to Luke with smashing clarity; he was drafted—the notice had come yesterday!

“Me, Luke Sims, drafted?! How on earth can that be?” he said to no one. As he spoke the pounding in his head increased, reducing him to what he really was: a person suffering a tremendous hangover. He winced with the pain and moved as a zombie back to the bed.

“Big deaaaaal. So I dropped a dumb class. I had my reasons—good reasons.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, he hesitated while he pressed on his temples with both hands. The effort began to ease the throbbing; finally the pain subsided. Then he raised his head slowly away from his hands and continued. “There weren’t enough women in the damn class, only four,” he mumbled, sounding almost confident of his logic the way drunk people do.

“And then the friggin’ college notified the draft board—and I am drafted,” he said in a mocking, falsetto voice, still heavily under the effects of the heavy mixture of alcohol he had consumed only hours earlier.

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” came his slurred declaration. He leaned backward slowly, finally falling the last few inches to the bed as he faced the dark ceiling. A nearby streetlight illuminated part of his bedroom wall, hurting his eyes with its stark contrast to the rest of the room. His mind went blank, only the pain of the light remained. As he quickly looked away, he was slowly able to focus on his predicament again.

“I don’t even know how to fight. And I can’t remember the last time I was in a fight. I’m not a soldier,” he offered the empty room, self-pity showed in his tone. He swallowed hard. “I never thought this would happen to me.” Through the intense alcohol shroud his body was still battling, he remembered last night and how the drinking had gotten real serious.

One bar stood out in particular, not because of its grandness but because of what had happened there. It was a dark and old bar. Except for the dance floor, where a faceted, mirrored ball hung high above, reflecting spots of light across the small dance floor as it turned, the rest of the room was sheathed in near darkness. Tiny tables crowded near the small dance floor. Cigarette smoke floated to the ceiling and hung there in swirling patterns as darkened figures moved around the room, adding an eeriness to the adult play occurring there. Luke and his two college friends missed the scene around them as they focused solely on Luke's predicament—being drafted—and on drinking.

A small candle placed in a pink brandy snifter in the middle of their table offered a faint glow of light. Only one in four tables had a candle; the others shrank into darkness. Just enough light existed for Luke to see the other men at the table but not enough to read their expressions. "Hey Luke, how about another round?" Luke's friend John suggested as he leaned across the small table, awaiting Luke's response.

"I am too drunk to sing and you can't stand ... so why not," Luke replied as he nodded his head. His friends, John and Carl, were both still students in good standing at San Diego State College. A quick comment by John to a passing barmaid brought another round. It was the tenth or twelfth bar of the evening, and nobody knew how many rounds had been consumed.

Once the drinks arrived, the trio again began to talk of Luke's problem—the same as they had at each bar that evening. At each bar Luke got more boisterous in rejecting the idea of serving in the Armed Services. Their talk was loud, now competing with the booming Country & Western music of the bar band.

"It could be worse, Luke," Carl offered after downing most of his beer.

"What do you mean? Wars kill people," bellowed Luke so loud that people around the bar turned their heads. "Screw that idea," continued Luke. "Let some dumb stiff go fight over there. Not me! Only idiots belong over there!" he said loudly. Then he chugged on his beer.

Even drunk Luke noticed the silence that followed. The band quit playing and people began to stare. Feeling a need to speak, Luke yelled to everyone “I didn’t start the gawddamn Vietnam War so screw the Army and their draft notice. Let the politicians go fight, not me!”

Some of the older customers in the bar took immediate offense. “Hey look at the yellow color over there at that table,” yelled a middle-age man. Nods of approval came from several other patrons around the room.

“If you don’t like America, leave it,” said a fat lady two tables away.

“Cowards like you deserve to be shot,” barked an older man seated at the bar.

Seemingly to break the mood, the band quickly began to play again. As the musical notes reached their ears, the trio realized the band was not siding with them. The song, “God Bless America,” seemed to add fuel to the flames as the glares from other patrons focused on Luke. The sound of scooting chairs filled the room as everyone in the bar stood—except Luke and his buddies—and sang it. The message was clear: only patriots were welcome. The trio sat and watched in silence.

Drunkenly one of the older patrons stumbled over to Luke’s table and began telling him of his exploits in Korea and WWII. Luke tuned him out, turning his back towards the aging man.

Luke wasn’t impressed. Those wars weren’t at all like what he had been hearing about Vietnam. It seemed like the whole nation was buzzing about the Vietnam War. The headlines today said something about U. S. troop build up, and that by May 1966, just three months from now, that the number of U. S. troops deployed there could reach 190,000. Luke adamantly did not want to be just be another number, a nameless body stuck somewhere in the process of war.

“Leave us alone,” Luke rudely said to the veteran as he turned further to place his back fully toward the man. When he didn’t leave, Luke turned and shoved him away, knocking over a table in the process. The veteran came up swinging, hitting Luke in the stomach.