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**FIVE**

**TWENTY**

**A Heartbreaker**

Just before sunset the company moved in closer until we were only about seventy or eighty yards from the treeline where we dug our usual circular perimeter of foxholes, the captain's CP located in the center.

The napalm earlier had burned very hot and fast, scorching most of the leaves off the trees and charring the outer surface of the trunks. From what we understood of it, the idea behind napalm wasn't so much that it would burn solid objects on the ground as that it consumed most of the oxygen in the air over a huge area. The purpose for that was to suffocate anyone who might be hiding in an underground foxhole or bunker.

When Rick, Whitey, Lange, and I finished our hole, Ron, our squad leader, came over from the next one.

"Rick, take Hutton out front with you and show him how we set up the trip flare."

Rick and I walked about thirty feet in front of our position where he handed me a wooden stake with a thin, green wire tied to it. The rest of the wire was wrapped around the body of the flare canister he held in his own hand.

"Now start backing away slowly and I'll unwrap the wire as you go."

He pointed in the direction that would take me some twenty feet away, across the front of our hole. When it was completely unraveled, he pushed the stake with the flare attached to it into the ground at his

location and had me do the same at my end. This made the almost invisible wire taut about six inches above the ground.

With each hole putting a flare across its front, the perimeter was literally encircled by trip wires. If anyone came along in the dark and snagged one, the pin would pull and ignite the flare.

While we were in the process of doing that, it had gone from twilight to near darkness. I walked back over to where Rick was squatting. He straightened the ends of the cotter pin on the flare, with the wire tied to it, so that it could pull out easily. I was standing over him when something caught my eye that didn't look quite right, even for someone with my lack of experience.

Whitey, who was back at the perimeter, was standing bolt upright, in a typical police stance—legs spread slightly apart and arms straight out in front of him. In his right hand he held a .38 caliber revolver with the butt resting firmly in the palm of his left. He was aiming over to the side of where we were standing.

“Hey Rick,...what's Whitey doing?” I whispered.

Rick stood and looked over at Whitey. Then his gaze followed the bead to where the pistol was pointing. The two of us could just make out the figure of a man standing about the same distance we were from the perimeter, but about fifty or sixty feet to our side.

I still didn't fully comprehend what was happening when Rick whispered in a level tone, “Let's get back to the perimeter.”

When we approached Whitey, he didn't move out of his stance with the pistol.

“What's going on?” Rick asked at his side.

Whitey kept the pistol trained on the figure, “Who is that out there?”

All four of us, standing around the hole with our weapons, now stared out at the black silhouette. It was odd because the figure made no movement whatsoever, but stood as still as a statue in the not quite total darkness.

“Who’s that standing out there?” Whitey repeated.

Now we heard the men farther along the perimeter, directly in front of the figure, begin calling out.

“Who is that out there?! Identify yourself.”

We could just make out two men leave the perimeter and head slowly, M-16s at the ready, toward the figure.

“Who are you?” they called as they walked.

Then, in an instant, all hell broke loose. There was a bright flash, lighting the area like the momentary flash of a camera, accompanied by a muffled boom.

We all hit the ground, pointing our weapons in the direction of the stranger. In the instant after the flash, the two men who’d walked out appeared to dive to the ground and the unknown figure dove into the two-foot high elephant grass a few feet behind him.

Everyone on this side of the perimeter opened fire on the spot where he’d disappeared. It was totally dark now, which made it difficult to see much of anything. The intense firing lasted only a matter of seven to ten seconds, but in that time hundreds of rounds sprayed the grassy area.

And, suddenly, there was silence.

In the brief period, during which the action had taken place, I felt that old tension grip the pit of my stomach with a vengeance.

Each hole listened intently to see if they could hear any movement in front of their own positions. After awhile, we did hear something. I rested my rifle on the edge of the foxhole, into which I and the others had scrambled, and turned an ear to the darkness. My heart wrenched. It was the sound of someone crying.

Of the two men who’d gone out, one had been able to crawl back to the perimeter unharmed. The other still lay near the spot where he fell. The initial flash we’d seen was the explosion of a chi cong grenade the unknown figure held concealed. This was a primitive form of hand grenade, shaped like the

German tin can type with a handle at one end. Instead of the pin that was pulled on American grenades, there was a string sticking out the butt of the handle which was jerked sharply so that its friction would ignite the fuse.

This type of grenade was extremely unpredictable in that the force of its blast usually went out in only one direction. If it went off facing away from you, it was likely you'd receive minor injury at most, but if it was facing in your direction, you were in big trouble.

Our man, lying out there, had taken the full brunt of it in the stomach when the figure threw it at him point blank.

The sound we could hear now was that man crying. Through his pain he called out several times, warning the guys on the perimeter near him not to go out there because he could still hear the "gook" moving around in the grass. In a matter of minutes the crying eased to a whimper, and then it stopped altogether.

A couple of men managed to slip out and bring him back to the perimeter, but he was gone. He'd spent his last breath calling to his friends about the danger still out there.

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And so all of this was what I had for contemplation, on my second night, sitting on the edge of the foxhole in the darkness. It was also what made sleep such a luxury when my turn for watch was over.