

Chapter one

Taking a long pull from the bottle of Krishna mineral water, the solitary dark-skinned man mopped his handsome features with a handkerchief and surveyed his surroundings. The humidity never changed, but the temperature was still very high for late October. Within beams of light coming from the few windows, he could see the air was filled with myriad dust motes, and the collective odor of dust, mold, sweat, and feces was strong in his nostrils. He thought he would eventually become accustomed to the smell, but he had been wrong.

The old, unused building was a pig-sty. He glanced with disgust at the filthy floor, on which could be seen frequent collections of rat droppings, occasional meandering cockroaches, and scattered cigarette butts. The rat droppings he found particularly repugnant, and despite his discipline he cringed. He had been a party to some terrible things in his life, but he simply could not stomach rats.

His once pristine khaki uniform now dank and wrinkled, he took another drink of water as he slowly paced about. Large sweat stains had formed around his neck and in both armpits. This interrogation, he reflected, should have been carried out in the relative cool of night. The abandoned warehouse was like a sauna, as if the work being done there wasn't already unpleasant enough.

Having finally been obliged to take a respite from the interrogation, Chandra had taken a few moments to distance himself from the others. He wasn't doing all that much anyway, only watching. But he had always found torture quite unsavory, and strongly felt this type of backroom operation was beneath him. However, what he'd most needed to have a break from was that fool Vasud, and his silly swordplay. The man thinks he's Errol Flynn, he thought angrily, wiping the sweat from his face and brow.

From within the semi-darkness of the cavernous building, a bone-chilling scream slashed through the still, sultry air. The subject of the interrogation could be heard weeping and begging for mercy, his speech slurred and nearly unintelligible. After a few moments the man's pleading voice could no longer be heard. The interior of the building was for a time completely quiet. Chandra cursed, and downing the last of his bottled water, he tossed the plastic container on the floor beside the others.

"Those animals have probably killed him," he grumbled, as he strode briskly toward a better lit area further into the building's interior. Vasud knows nothing of interrogation, he thought angrily. The man is overly fond of inflicting pain on others. In fact, I would go so far as to say he derives an almost sexual gratification from it.

He could see the three of them now, as he approached the circle of light cast by a naked overhead bulb. Vasud and his lackey were both just gaping at the pathetic fellow, who was either dead or just unconscious, Chandra wasn't yet certain which. He glanced at Vasud as he reached the edge of the illuminated circle. Well, he thought with relief, at least the lunatic's not still prancing around with that saber.

In the center of the circle of light was a naked man secured to a chair. Emaciated in appearance, the man sat in a pool of his own excrement, a mucoid string of vomitus bridging his mouth and left thigh.

The unresponsive man was tightly bound with duct tape to the heavy wood chair, and when Chandra was standing beside him, the stench was almost overpowering. The man's head and upper body were lolled over as far to the right as the duct tape wound about his torso would allow. Chandra hadn't been this close to the poor wretch all afternoon, and he was aghast at the man's hideous condition. Staring at the horrid apparition before him, Chandra felt like a lowly savage. As he palpated the carotid artery for a pulse, he thought for a moment he might be ill. Pulling a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, he clamped it over his mouth and nose and was able to block the fetid odor, fighting off the rising waves of nausea.

From behind him he heard Vasud's deep, self-assured voice: "I will say one thing for this man Tim Randall," he proclaimed, with genuine awe. "He may not look like much, but the man can withstand some serious abuse. I must admit that I am astonished. I have seen good men crack wide open by now."

Chandra did not initially respond. After a time, he said, "He has a reasonably strong pulse. He has just passed out again from shock. But if we press on much longer we will kill him." If another hole were burned into the man's chest, Chandra thought with dread, he could not bear to watch. "It is fairly obvious to me," he said, turning to Vasud, "that this man doesn't possess the knowledge that we seek. If he did, he would have talked. Indeed, any man would with what you've put him through."

Chandra briefly examined the man who stood waiting impassively beside the prisoner's chair. What a piece of work he is, he thought in disgust. The man wasn't tall, perhaps five feet, nine inches in height, but was lean and muscular. Nearly naked, he wore only a loincloth, and his black skin glistened with sweat. In his right hand were a bloody pair of pliers, and his face and upper body were heavily spattered with tiny specks of blood. Near the man stood an empty wooden crate, upon which lay a burning cigarette, its smoke adding to the melange of odors already present. They had been there over two hours, and Chandra had not heard the man utter a single word.

Hearing grunts and heavy breathing, Chandra turned to see that Vasud had resumed practicing his swordsmanship. Unable to mask his annoyance, he glanced at the man next to Randall, and then back at Vasud. As the others looked on, the large man repeatedly lunged, thrust, parried, and traversed against an imaginary foe. Although a bear of a man, Chandra had to admit Vasud was surprisingly athletic. He grudgingly admired the large man's grace, coordination, and speed, and for a few moments he forgot his irritation. He was impressed with Vasud's precise sword handling, nimble footwork, and most of all, by his astounding quickness. Watching the man's agile movements, Chandra was reminded of a huge panther.

"With all due respect, my friend," Chandra ventured, "let us end this folly. This pitiful man knows nothing. He is just a heroin addict, a mere shell of a man. He will undoubtedly die soon, anyway."

As though he hadn't heard, Vasud said nothing, continuing to battle his invisible opponent. After a few more minutes, he abruptly halted his workout, and breathing heavily, he asked, "What do you think of my new sword, Chandra? Not really wanting or expecting an answer, he seemed oblivious to the others, and without pause he said, "I had it specially made for me, and it has perfectly distributed weight and balance." Admiring the gleaming saber, he added, "Is it not a thing of beauty?" Turning to Chandra, the large, fleshy man asserted, "It is a scimitar, the most beautifully designed sword yet devised. I can hardly wait to test it against the Nihangs at the annual Hola Mohalla festival this spring." Sheathing the sword, Vasud lay it atop another wooden shipping crate and strode toward the circle of light cast on the warehouse floor.

"Assuming he has knowledge of what we seek," said Vasud, "I heartily agree with you, Chandra. No man could have held out this long. The reason I have persisted is that I have very good reason to believe he knows the whereabouts of our missing item. But after what he has been through, I must grudgingly concede that he doesn't know."

Observing the floor illuminated by the overhead light, a thin smile broke over Vasud's bearded face. "Well, well, well," he said casually, "we've made quite a mess here, haven't we, Kirit." He smiled at the man in the loincloth, who remained silent and stone-faced.

Nudging with his foot one of the many bloody fingernails about the victim's chair, Vasud then turned his attention to the sickly form duct-taped to the chair, his fingers and toes bloody stumps, and a multitude of round, angry burns covering his chest and shoulders.

"As a matter of fact, my taciturn friend," he continued, "this is downright grotesque." Glancing down at the scattered rivulets and tiny pools of blood on the floor, he said, "But not to worry. The rats will make short work of these hors d'oeuvres we've left them." Chuckling at his joke, he adjusted his China blue silk turban as he surveyed the grisly scene.

Chandra stood dumbstruck, regarding his comrade with a stupefied expression. It seemed that his new business partner never ceased to amaze him with his self-adoration, total absence of compassion and remorse, and complete willingness to do whatever was necessary to achieve his ends. He had initially thought that Vasud was simply an ambitious and ruthless businessman, but with time a frightening picture had gradually taken shape of a psychotic individual hiding behind a mask of normalcy. The man was capable of a beguiling charm, but occasionally the disguise was lifted to allow a brief glimpse of the monster beneath. On this day, Chandra had gotten such a glimpse.

Finding his voice, Chandra queried, "What shall we do with him now?"

"He is to be taken to the clinic immediately," Vasud replied, nodding at the man in the loincloth. "Kirit will see to it."

Chandra was puzzled. "Why the clinic?" he asked. "Surely after nearly killing the poor bugger, you don't intend to give him medical treatment."

"Of course not," answered Vasud, amused. "My word, no." He snickered, as if any idiot should know what he was thinking. After a pause, he said in exasperation, "I want his kidneys, man!" Smiling, and raising his eyebrows, he added, "And whatever else his worthless carcass can provide for sale on the black market." Wheeling around, he gathered his sportcoat, necktie, and saber and walked briskly toward the door through which they had entered.

That seemed to Chandra to have been an eternity ago. Left standing in stunned silence, he was once again unprepared for the depth of Vasud's depravity. He had no doubt the man was certifiably mad. "May our Lord Vishnu guide and protect us all," he whispered.

"Are you coming, Chandra?" Vasud shouted, stopping to wait for him. "Let's go. You can pray later." Rolling his eyes, he mumbled under his breath, "Hindus."

After Chandra had caught up, the two of them conversed as they strolled to the exit.

"You really should take up fencing, Chandra," said Vasud, "and join me in attending the spring Hola Mohalla festival. It is an excellent way to maintain one's skills as a swordsman, and the exercise helps keep one fit."

Glancing at the other's thick, fleshy body, Chandra wondered why it hadn't done more for Vasud's physique. "I fenced some while in the army," he replied, "but that was years ago."

Appearing momentarily distracted, Vasud said, "Excuse me a moment, Chandra. I almost forgot something important." Turning back toward the building's interior, he summoned the man in loincloth, who joined them straightaway.

"When the surgeons are finished with him, Kirit," said Vasud, "I want his body put in the trunk of a car, and transported at least five miles outside the city limits. Use the same men as in the past. Instruct them to bury the body, and I mean deep. I don't want them to just throw a little dirt on top of the corpse. And so that it won't appear to be exactly what it is, have them smooth the overlying dirt, and cover the grave with brush, leaves, and some large stones. I don't want to hear the body was discovered because it was dug up by wild animals. Is that understood?"

Returning Vasud's steady gaze, his expression unchanging, the man nodded.

"Very good, then," said Vasud. "You may carry on." As the man hurried off, he turned again to Chandra. "As you can see," he said, smiling, "my man Kirit doesn't have much to say, but when I give him an order, it is done. I pay him for his reliability, not his conversation."

Vasud paused. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes, you fenced while in the army. So you've had experience. Then that's perfect! By all means, you must pick up the sword again," said Vasud enthusiastically. "We could train together."

Not likely, thought Chandra. "I think not," he replied. "I will leave the swordsmanship to you, my friend. You have more than enough zeal for the both of us. But can we return to the problem at hand?"

"Of course," replied Vasud, his curiosity piqued.

"Please do not take offense, my friend, but I must confess at times I fear you aren't serious enough when dealing with our business matters. I am quite concerned about this Randall affair. And there is still the question of the missing disc. I'm certain I don't have to remind you that if the information on that disc falls into the wrong hands, then we are all finished. Even considering the best case scenario, there is bound to be some fallout from this. There can be no trace of Randall to be found. He must simply evaporate."

Vasud's steely eyes narrowed, and for a moment he didn't speak, his gaze unwavering. Just as you, my arrogant friend, will evaporate when I no longer need your services. "If today, Chandra, I have not appeared sufficiently attentive, then I must apologize. I can assure you that my vested interests demand my full involvement in all facets of my -- and your -- business. This is so even when it appears otherwise."

"Very good. That is all the assurance I need. I will not speak of it again."

Placing his left hand on Chandra's right shoulder, and holding the saber in his right, Vasud said, "I suppose I do get a bit carried away with my passion for swords and fencing. It's just that sometimes I feel that I am living in the wrong time. I rightfully belong in the

time of the Sikh Empire, riding on horseback and winning battles with my sword." With a faraway look in his bright eyes, he unsheathed the scimitar with a flourish. "I was intended to ride full gallop across the plain, saber at the ready, preparing to turn back the Afghan or British invaders." Facing Chandra again, he looked directly into the other man's eyes. "That, my friend, is where I was meant to be. It's where I rightfully should be. It's only by a cruel trick of fate that I exist in this century."

Quiet for a moment, Chandra chuckled nervously. "My word, man," he said. "Listening to you talk, it almost sounds as though you were there."

Vasud did not immediately reply. His smile gone, and his brow furrowed, he said, "Oh, I was there, Chandra. I most certainly was there."

Chandra didn't reply, and behind his faint smile he was for the first time having doubts about his alliance with the other man. Vasud truly frightened him. Of all the multi-millionaires to fall in with, I choose him, he lamented silently. The man is a raving lunatic. It's surprising that he hasn't somehow landed himself in an asylum long before now. He actually believes this rubbish he's spouting. On the other hand, he reflected, Vasud's money was just as good as a sane man's. If he can deliver the promotions he promised, then this union will have been well worth it. I will have arrived. I will then be both a politically powerful and wealthy man.

The two were outside the warehouse now, preparing to enter their respective vehicles.

"Keep me informed, my friend," said Chandra, as he opened the door of his maroon Mercury sedan, "and I will do the same for you."

"You can count on it," said Vasud, with a wave of his hand. He opened the door of his sleek, black Mercedes 500E and slid into the seat, watching as the other man drove away. Pulling the scimitar partially out of its scabbard, for a moment he sat admiring the sheen and gentle curve of the blade. A wan smile on his now saddened features, he stared dreamily at the sword, as if lost in thought. "A cruel trick of fate, indeed," he mumbled.

Chapter Two

The two soldiers, stripped of web gear and equipment, were standing in a muddy jungle clearing encircled by enemy troops. At the edge of the clearing was dense, seemingly impenetrable jungle, and neither vegetation nor palm trees stirred in the still air. A steady rain was falling. The raindrops were so fine and misty that the drizzle seemed suspended in air rather than descending from the leaden sky. With an almost palpable humidity, the heavy air made breathing difficult. The soldiers' uniforms were soaked through and clinging to their bodies. Under less dreadful circumstances the chafing and added weight of saturated jungle fatigues would definitely be something about which to complain. But for these newly-taken prisoners-of-war, brutal realities have relegated such petty annoyances to insignificant status.

The stench of jungle decay and death permeate the air. Occasional smudges and small pools of bright-red blood stand out starkly against the background of the slimy, stinking mud. The scattered bodies of Vietcong and American soldiers dot the open area, a just-ended ambush having taken the lives of the entire American patrol, save these two.

He glanced at young Private Reynolds, the green replacement sent to his outfit only two days earlier. The kid was so stunned, he hadn't even returned fire. During the brief firefight, the petrified eighteen-year-old had lost his helmet, and his wet, red hair was matted to his scalp. A large drop of water fell at regular intervals from the tip of his freckled nose. His terror-stricken face, pocked with acne, was pallid and strained.

Dressed in black pyjamas and wearing sandals, the Vietcong officer stepped up and stood directly in front of Randall, their faces only inches apart. The Asian's foul breath reeked of nuoc mam, the strong-smelling fish sauce the Vietnamese put on virtually all of their food. Vaguely noting that the Vietcong was too thin and appeared malnourished, he was more impressed by the man's adolescent appearance, and shocked that such a youthful visage could harbor such hatred.

His loathing eyes not moving from the American's face, the Vietcong pulled down the front of his pyjama pants and urinated on the man's feet and ankles. Rage momentarily outstripping fear and dread, Randall struggled to remain impassive, avoiding eye contact

and staring down at the mud. If he were to survive, during the next few minutes he would have to handle himself with great care.

Bound with hands and arms roped to bamboo poles lain across their shoulders, the two prisoners were violently kicked in the backs of their knees, causing them to drop to a kneeling position.

The Vietcong officer began pacing around them, wildly gesticulating and shouting angrily in Vietnamese. He now held a machete in his right hand, pausing at intervals to spit on one or the other of the captives.

He had gradually become aware of yet another foul odor inter-mixed with the other unpleasant smells all about him. After a time he identified the source to be Private Reynolds, and he soon realized with empathy that the young man had soiled his pants. The enemy soldiers, also detecting the odor, found this quite amusing, the previously sullen Vietcong laughing and jeering scornfully. An enemy soldier rushed over to the young American, kicked him sharply in the back, and then spit on him, before returning to his place in the circle.

The enemy officer stopped pacing and stood motionless behind them, still raging and spewing a continuous stream of guttural Vietnamese. Now and again one of the Vietcong soldiers shouted something – either words of encouragement to their leader, or contempt and mockery for the prisoners – Randall couldn't be sure which.

Something awful was coming, that much was certain. The pubertal VC officer was quite the showman, and appeared to be fast approaching his grande finale. Squinting stoically at the ground before him, he wondered, will it be him or me? Struggling to mask any outward sign of fear, he would not allow these scrawny, yellow monkeys the pleasure of knowing he was afraid.

But inside of his adrenaline-flooded body, his pulse was pounding like a triphammer, his muscles as taut as a coiled spring. His chest was so tight his breaths came in brief spasms. He felt as if he might explode, and knew he was nearing his breaking point. Despite a continuous urge to swallow, he had no saliva, and with each effort the back of his tongue and throat stuck together.

The young GI beside him emitted a strained, gasping sob. With his peripheral vision, he saw the boy glance his direction before hearing him mumble plaintively, his voice trembling, "Please... please don't kill me." Focusing on the slimy earth in front of him, he avoided looking at the weeping soldier beside him, as if seeing the terror on the man's face would mirror to him his own.

His mind seemed to abruptly shift gears, and he became oddly detached from this awful tableau, as though he were a neutral party viewing the scene from a distance.

To his right, there was a sudden blur of motion, followed instantly by a geyser of crimson, spattering gore over his face and trunk. Reynold's neck had been partially severed by the machete, and his head was lolling over to the left, a jet of arterial blood spurting from his transected right carotid.

It took three more strokes to completely hack off Reynold's head, which plopped into the mud beside Randall's knees. He gaped in horror as the head's mouth continued moving soundlessly, and its eyes rolled about. After several seconds the face was still, with its unseeing eyes staring blankly into space.

Randall awakened with a violent start, bolting upright in bed. Realizing his right hand clutched his throat, he mumbled, "I'm okay ... I'm okay." His right arm relaxed, and his hand fell away from his neck. "It was only a dream," he muttered, as if to reassure himself. He was always awakened at the same point in the dream, with Reynold's head looking up at him from the mud. No matter how many times he had the nightmare, the grisly vision of the severed head was never any less terrifying.

His hair wet and matted, and his skin slick with sweat, Randall's heart felt as though it were trying to beat its way out of his chest. Only after several minutes was he able to resume normal breathing, and he fell back on the bed, the nightmare leaving him completely spent.

This was his most frequent Vietnam nightmare, and for Randall was a reliving of an actual event that happened at Khe Sanh in 1968. His nine-man patrol had been ambushed and annihilated by a larger Vietcong force. Presumably because he was an officer, he hadn't been killed along with Reynolds, and while being taken north by the Vietcong, he had managed to escape. It had taken him three days to work his way back to the American lines, where ironically he had been mistakenly shot and wounded by a Marine sentry while attempting to establish contact. As this thought went through his mind, he unconsciously

fingered the depressed area of scarring on his upper right thigh, his memento from that day.

There's no doubt about it, he contemplated, these dreams are sucking the life out of me. Sitting up on the side of the bed, the faces of the eight men he lost that day passed before his mind's eye yet another time. He would never forget their names or their faces. One of the oddities of having been in combat, Randall had found, was that one thought about some of his experiences every day for the rest of his life. He had spoken with several other combat veterans, and they had confirmed that they too had recurring daily memories of their war experience. Not surprisingly, most of these memories were of the soldier's most horrifying experiences, but sometimes they were of events that seemed relatively insignificant. He had resigned himself to the fact that there were certain events from his war experience that he would think about every single day. The ambush of his patrol at Khe Sanh was one of them.

Despite feeling completely exhausted, he was unable to go back to sleep. A glance at his bedside clock showed the time at 4:36 AM, too late to take a Valium. If he took one now he'd be a zombie all day tomorrow, or not be able to get out of bed, period.

Maybe I should take the Valium more often, he pondered, and perhaps be more proactive, taking them at bedtime when I sense a bad night's coming. I do sort of intuitively know when the dreams are going to come.

His VA Doctor had cautioned him not to take the Valium routinely, but had encouraged Randall to use the sedative fairly liberally, advising him not to "white-knuckle it" too often. Even though the Doctor allowed him fifteen 10 mg Valium per month, Randall usually made this number last two or even three months. The Doctor emphasized that sleep was of the utmost importance, and an absolute essential for the maintenance of mental and emotional well-being. The truth of the matter was that Randall was afraid of the Valium. He did not want to become "hooked" on them, and end up like his dad and brother.

In spite of his fear of Valium, and drugs in general, Randall knew this to be true: when he went several days without adequate sleep, whether due to increased work demands and/or insomnia, he could feel himself coming unglued. He couldn't think clearly, as if he constantly had something in the back of his mind distracting him. The resulting fatigue made it difficult to get through the workday.

During the past year he had become aware of a steadily increasing anxiety level. He didn't know why at certain times he became so anxious. It wasn't that he was worried about any particular thing. He felt afraid of something, but didn't know what it was. Randall had never been afraid of anything, and it seemed he would be okay, if only he could identify the danger. But he couldn't, because there wasn't a tangible threat. The sense of being threatened was wholly in his mind, and that was his dilemma. It was a sense of foreboding, like a vague warning of the approach of some unknown menace. Not only was he troubled by an increased baseline level of anxiety, he had experienced a few full-blown panic attacks, with paralyzing chest tightness, dizziness, and smothering shortness of breath. These attacks, along with his nightmares, were more frequent during periods of insomnia and increased psychological stress.

Until recently he had never been troubled by daytime flashbacks, but during the past two to three months, Randall had experienced difficulties with sudden intrusive memories from the war. Before this started, he had always assumed that his nightmares were the equivalent of others' flashbacks. He found the flashbacks more disturbing than the nightmares. At the very least, the flashbacks made focusing on one's work temporarily impossible, and there was no denying his job performance had suffered. Considering the worst-case scenario, a moment's inattention caused by a flashback could easily get a person killed on the street. It was unlikely there had been enough change to draw anyone else's scrutiny, but Randall felt certain Drake had noticed; however, his friend and partner had so far said nothing.

He had attempted to keep his emotional problems from his partner, but Larry Drake knew him well, and Randall sensed that his friend knew he wasn't as solid psychologically as he once was and needed to be. Randall was painfully aware he wasn't the only one to be considered within the context of his emotional problems. It required no stretch of the imagination to see that a distraction to Randall could result in his partner's injury or death, and Drake had a wife and three kids. He had been struggling with rising guilt over this, and it was a strong incentive to fully commit to therapy for his psychiatric problems.

Following a nerve-wracking bust a few weeks earlier, Randall had to breathe into a small paper bag in order to control his breathing. Drake had made light of it, but Randall was certain he'd been more concerned than he'd let on. Fearful of recurrences, he'd taken to

carrying such a sack with him at all times. Sometimes, the anxiety attacks just suddenly happened, without any apparent provocation. Worrying about an impending attack only further increased his anxiety.

Randall had always feared becoming an addict and/or alcoholic like his father and brother. Through his work he'd become well-acquainted with addiction and knew the disease was hereditary. He was therefore uncomfortably aware that with his family history, he was at extremely high risk. He had even been told once by a VA alcohol and drug counselor that he was just a "dry drunk." Randall had been insulted and asked him what that meant, and was told it was a person with all the character defects and hangups of an alcoholic, but without that individual ever becoming a habitual drinker. Wounded by the counselor's remark, he had bluntly told the man where he could stick his "dry drunk" theory. Now he wondered if the fellow hadn't been on to something. He'd thought that one over for a long while, finally deciding that maybe he was a "dry drunk," but if so, that had to be better than a practicing one.

Of course, having a high stress occupation like police work didn't help matters. He had considered seeking a different line of work, but it seemed being a cop was all he knew. It was odd, he reflected, what different people feared. He had been through countless gun battles, and could have been killed on several occasions, but that didn't frighten him. The uncertainty of taking on a new line of work, for reasons he didn't understand, terrified him.

The one thing he knew for certain was that he didn't want to end up a down-and-out alcoholic-addict lying in a gutter somewhere like his poor dead brother. Jack Randall had spent his life telling himself he was different from Tim and his father, and running away from the reality that in the way that counted most, he was exactly like them. Secretly terrified their fate would befall him, Randall had never discussed the subject with anyone, not even Drake, his closest confidante. Viewing it as a weakness, he was too ashamed to breach the subject with anyone. On several occasions he'd wanted to bring up the subject during a psychiatric session, but had always backed out.

He made a mental note to begin scheduling regular appointments with his shrink. Randall was in the habit of making visits sporadically, when things got really bad. Usually by that time, he wasn't sleeping, couldn't concentrate on anything, and in general was a complete "basket case." His Doctor had repeatedly scolded him for his haphazard visits, impressing upon the ailing detective the greater effectiveness of routine sessions. The man had been pressing Randall to commit fully to therapy, arguing for at least weekly office sessions. Group therapy sessions with other Vietnam vets for treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder were suggested. He also wanted Randall to consider treatment of his condition with medication. The detective had thus far declined these recommendations, and the Doctor had repeatedly told him he was in denial about his emotional problems. He would only get better, the Doctor had said, if he followed through with all therapeutic suggestions.

Randall hated admitting it, most of all to himself, but he had to concede that his shrink was right. In fact, he had been resigned to this for some time. He had told himself all his life that he was different from the rest of his family, but in the end he had to face the fact that he wasn't. He was exactly like them, he'd just denied it all his life. It was high time he faced the facts and did what he knew was necessary. He had come to accept that he would never be happy or a whole person otherwise. He silently vowed that he would do everything the Doc recommended, but only after all the questions about Tim's death were answered to his complete satisfaction. He owed his brother at least that much.

His nervous system still over-stimulated, he tried to read, but was unable to concentrate. After brewing a pot of coffee, he carried a cup back to the bedroom. He turned on the television, and although oblivious to most of the program content, he found the background noise comforting. While sipping the coffee, he mainly just sat and brooded. He thought mostly about Tim, and for some strange reason childhood memories kept popping into his head. Memories that were all but forgotten. He thought about his parents, both long dead.

After about two hours, he rose from his bedside chair and sauntered to the bathroom to shower and shave. Then he would attend to the day's unpleasant tasks.

On Monday, four days earlier, Detective Jack Randall had been stunned by unexpected news. While at work at One Police Plaza in Manhattan, he had received a phone call from a man identifying himself as Dale Harris, a representative of the State Department in Washington, D.C.. Harris, courteous but impersonal, had told Randall that "I have been charged with the unpleasant task of informing you of your brother Tim's unfortunate death, by natural cause, while residing in India."

Harris, Randall had reflected, must be "charged" with carrying out this sort of thing on a fairly regular basis. The man was polished, with all the right words for such a grim occasion, but his voice conveyed not one iota of warmth or sympathy. Randall recalled being phoned years earlier by a Delta Airlines representative, informing him that his lost luggage had not been recovered. He had gotten a much greater sense of compassion from the woman calling from Delta than when this Harris called informing him of his brother's death.

"What do you mean 'by natural cause,'" asked Randall. "What was the specific cause of death?"

"Your brother, as I'm sure you're aware, was a nurse," replied Harris. "He contracted a virulent type of pneumonia, and unfortunately was unable to recover. This kind of thing is a constant risk for healthcare workers, particularly those working in countries such as India, where there is a high rate of occurrence of virtually every type of infectious disease, many of which have become almost unknown in the United States."

Randall was silent for a few seconds, then queried, "When will his body be sent home?"

"Probably by the end of the week. This office will contact you again in a few days with a specific arrival time. Do you have any further questions of me, Mr. Randall?"

"Not at this time," Randall responded. "Thank you for calling."

"The State Department wishes to convey to you our sincere condolences during this difficult time. You may contact this office if I can be of any further assistance." After giving Randall his name and phone number, he hung up.

Afterward, Randall had mentally replayed their conversation. One could readily accept the fact that in India, compared to the United States, infectious disease was rampant. But Tim had always been as healthy as the proverbial horse, was a non-smoker, and had never been troubled with any kind of respiratory problem. How often does a healthy forty-six year-old man die of pneumonia in this day and time? On the other hand, he reflected, he hadn't been in contact with Tim for years, so who knows what health problems he might have developed during the interim? He didn't really want to consider the possibility, but Randall also wondered if Tim could possibly have been shooting smack again. Also, one had to allow for natural deaths that seemingly made no sense. It seemed that almost every day one heard reports of freakish deaths of supposedly healthy individuals.

Harris' office had called his home the next day and left the message that Tim's body would be flown in to John F. Kennedy International Airport on the following Friday, with an estimated arrival time of 6 AM. Randall didn't play back the message until Wednesday morning. During the intervening two days, he had thoroughly contemplated his telephone conversation with Harris, and his built-in bullshit alarm was sounding loud and long. There was something about what Harris said that just didn't ring true. Randall had the distinct feeling the man was hiding something. At the very least, he sensed Harris hadn't revealed all the facts surrounding Tim's death.

Unsatisfied with what he'd previously been told, he phoned Harris' office that morning hoping to obtain more information. Dialing the number Harris had given him, a woman's voice answered, and at his request Harris was summoned to the phone.

This time Randall could detect a hint of irritation in the man's tone of voice, and he was polite but curt. He told Randall he'd received no further information regarding his brother's death, but that he would attempt obtaining more relevant facts from the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C..

After a moment's pause, with the first trace of sympathy in his voice, Harris added, "Look, Mr. Randall, I've dealt with many situations such as this, where Americans, whether on vacation or residing there, have died while in a third world country. To be quite frank, this is probably all the information on your brother's death that we will be able to obtain. While I can certainly relate to your need for closure, I can only tell you from years of experience that frustration is the norm when dealing with a third world nation in this situation. And India is perhaps one of the worst. It is a huge country, large parts of which are literally a century behind us in development. You must realize that their data-tracking

systems are not even close to what we have in the United States, and their record-keeping systems are antiquated."

"Additionally, in India, as in many other countries," Harris continued, "the people have a completely different attitude toward death. India's population is over one billion, and a single human life is simply not valued like it is in our country. Their attitude, which has much to do with their religious beliefs, is that everything born eventually has to die, and the Indian people are in general much more accepting of death and more at peace with death than are Americans."

Still far from satisfied, Randall had been left with the impression that Harris was at least giving him an honest appraisal of the situation. Maybe it was because he was a cop, and it was second nature for him to doubt people, but he still felt the man knew more than he was telling. After listening to all that he had to say, Randall thanked him and hung up.

Now Friday had arrived, and Tim would be coming home. Standing at his bedroom window, Randall was lost in thought, peering out at his suburban neighborhood, with its clean, curbed streets bathed by the morning sun. He watched the children, with their ever-present backpacks, trudging past on their way to catch the schoolbus where it stopped each morning at the corner. It was just another day for them, he reflected. There was no tragedy in their lives, only the mundane to be dealt with. Somehow, it just didn't seem right. A person dies, and the world just keeps on going, business as usual. His brother, the only brother he had, was dead, and he was the only one in the world for whom it mattered. Normally watching the passing children from his bathroom window was his favorite part of his morning routine. It wasn't unusual for him to sip coffee while pausing to watch them for fifteen or twenty minutes. But not today. He soon had to turn away from the window. Seeing the happy-go-lucky kids, so oblivious to any problems, only served to deepen his loneliness.

When he had listened to Tim's message on his answering machine, Randall had assumed that his brother was once again in drug-related trouble. Over the years he had received many telephone calls from his brother pleading with Randall for help. This scenario usually assumed one or the other of two forms: he either needed money, or he needed to be bailed out of jail. He'd thought this time Tim had probably relapsed, and needed cash to buy more drugs, or pay for drugs he'd already used. Or perhaps he urgently needed to repay loan sharks the money he'd borrowed to purchase drugs, like the time Randall had bailed him out of trouble in Atlantic City. He had understandably not been in a rush to return Tim's call. Then, before he had called him back, he had gotten the news of Tim's death. Now, on top of everything else, he was wrestling with guilt over not returning his brother's call in his time of need.

To say that Randall was unemotional was a gross understatement. Emotions could only be viewed as a detriment for a marine, and twenty years in the Corps had conditioned nearly all the feelings out of him. Feelings weren't something encouraged in a homicide cop, either. But the truth was that Randall wasn't comfortable with feelings, and he strictly avoided them. They made him feel awkward, and he simply didn't know how to deal with them. He always kept himself in check, never allowing himself to be drawn into emotionally painful or touching situations. He held others at arm's length, never allowing them even a glimpse of who he really was.

When he was in his twenties, he had thought it macho and relished his fellow soldiers calling him "Ice," or "Iceman." By the time a man reached his fifties, as he had, all this seemed in retrospect to be childish and unimportant. Maturity eventually unmasked such behavior, always revealing it for the foolishness that it was. At that moment, Detective Jack Randall didn't feel strong, macho, or tough. His only wish was to have seen Tim once more before his death.

He had finished showering, and standing before his bathroom mirror, he stared pensively at his reflection. Unfamiliar with the ache and emptiness deep in his chest, Randall at once wanted to embrace it for its humanity, and despised it for making him weak. It was the closest thing to true heartache he'd ever known. Accustomed to turning away from, to compartmentalizing such painful feelings, something at that moment wouldn't let him. Lathering his face with shaving gel, he released a long sigh. "Today," he muttered to himself, "is really going to kick my butt."

As he shaved, he couldn't fight off a rising sense of profound gloom. Despair and hopelessness had descended upon him like dark shadows. The reality of his lonely, empty life was made starkly clear. He'd lived on the ragged edge all his life, and that was far too long for any man. It was high time for a change. Maybe it was time he found a good

woman and settled down, had some kids. He'd always loved children, and it was a wonderful thought that someday he might have his own. After further consideration, though, he realized it was also a frightening thought. It was just that he had been alone so long. He was unsure of his readiness for such responsibility.

Randall contemplated the morbid tenor of his thoughts. He thought it odd that the death of someone close always prompted such brooding. He and Tim hadn't been close as adults; yet, it was as if some unwritten law dictated the proper level of mourning for a brother. There had been a death in his immediate family, and it was decreed that he have dreary thoughts and be despondent for awhile. Was he sad simply because he was supposed to be? Tim was probably in a better place, so why be sad for him? He hadn't missed Tim while he was alive, so why now? Pondering for a moment, he decided it must be the sense that someone is taken from us, never to be seen again, at least in this lifetime. Yes, that was it, he thought. It was the finality of death that led to such morose ruminations in survivors. It couldn't be undone. There were no bonus chances for last goodbyes, or for ill feelings that needed to be set right. Death was a grim reminder of the brevity of our time on this earth, and how quickly this life can be taken from us. The death of one near to us tends to prompt a reassessment of priorities, a fresh reconsideration of what's really important. Death, he reflected, led a person to review his own life, and judge how wisely he'd spent his years. If only briefly, death underscored how precious a possession was this life.

Looking back on his own life, Randall concluded this was as good a reason as any to be despondent. His had surely been a wasted life. Maybe he was being too harsh, but he couldn't see how his life had amounted to much. His whole family was dead and gone now -- what good had he done them? What good had he ever done anybody?

Looking again at his grim face in the mirror, Randall shook his head and laughed. "Good grief, man," he said aloud. "Get a grip. Get hold of yourself. If you keep this up, you're going to find yourself sucking on the business end of a .45 automatic." By force of will, he pushed these thoughts away, out of his conscious mind. Switching the radio on, he turned up the volume, and continued shaving. This was the only way he knew how to cope with painful feelings. By pushing them deep down inside, they didn't have to be acknowledged, and they no longer caused him hurt. Soon he could be heard whistling and humming with the radio's music as he finished dressing.

Sitting on the bedside, he slipped on and tied his shoes, before standing in front of his bedroom dresser for a last check on his appearance. Not bad, he mused, for fifty-four years old. Though not a large man at five feet, eleven inches and one hundred and ninety pounds, Randall was obsessive about fitness, and it showed in his physique.

Even after leaving the Marines, he maintained rigorous adherence to the conditioning program he had acquired while with the Corps. Year around, regardless of the weather, he ran several miles daily. He had even competed in a couple of triathlons, but had found this athletic event a bit too extreme even for his tastes. Additionally, he shunned cigarettes and alcohol, and stuck to a diet reasonably low in fat and calories. As a result of this spartan lifestyle, Randall had maintained a svelte body and appeared to be a much younger man. He relished being able to physically outdo men fifteen and even twenty years his junior.

While examining his reflection, memories of Tim suddenly assailed his mind again. Reminiscing about their difficult upbringing, he unconsciously picked up his holstered 9mm Glock and clipped it to his belt. It's a wonder, he contemplated, that both of us didn't end up in prison.

The sons of a steelworker, he and Tim had grown up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their mother was a Licensed Practical Nurse, who was mainly employed privately for in-home care of the elderly and chronically ill. Randall remembered his father as big and brawny, with a bullying nature. He was perpetually red-faced, and always seemed sullen and angry. Forever complaining about something, his father had left Randall with the impression that he felt cheated, and was bitter with his lot in life. An alcoholic, and filled with self-loathing, he was soon drunk after arriving home from work each night. He was frequently verbally and physically abusive, and Randall learned early to keep his distance from the ill-tempered man. But little Tim, more needful of his father's attention, was continually trying to talk to him or otherwise approach him, and the small boy was often the target of his vitriol.

His mother, he recalled with pity, was perhaps the greatest casualty of a life spent with an angry, abusive alcoholic. His father's continual barrage of verbal put-downs

reduced her over the years to a stooped, withdrawn, chain-smoking reed of a woman who had completely lost the joy of life. Try as he might, he could not recall a single instance of her laughing or appearing happy. My old man, he thought angrily, made certain there was no joy in our home. Steadily withdrawing into a world only she knew, in retrospect Randall realized that his mother was likely mentally ill from the time he and Tim were small children.

When Randall was seventeen, his father became weak and short of breath. His appetite declined, and he lost weight. The man no longer had the strength and breath for his frenzied episodes of physical and verbal abusiveness. Randall, Tim, and their mother had all known there was something seriously wrong, but for several weeks their home had known relative peace, and they certainly weren't going to suggest a visit to the doctor and risk incurring his wrath.

When he began coughing up blood, Randall's father was finally frightened into seeking medical attention. A chest x-ray had revealed a lung tumor, which was found to be inoperable. The doctors had told him there was no cure, but that a combination of radiation therapy and chemotherapy might prolong his life for six months to a year. It was in keeping with his foul demeanor that his father chose to have no treatment, opting instead to have one more thing to hate and at which to lash out. For the last three months of his miserable life, Randall recalled, his father had gotten ever more thin and feeble, but with an ample supply of narcotics provided by his doctor, he hadn't suffered much. In fact, although his father was still given to occasional raging fits, Randall remembered this as a happier time for the rest of the family. With his father in a narcotic haze much of the time, his mother was freed from his degrading outbursts, and she had brightened for a time. Perhaps, he speculated, this was also because it was obvious his father had needed her, and she had meticulously cared for him, doting on his every need until his death.

At the funeral, young Tim was the only one Randall remembered shedding tears for his father. Sparcely attended by only relatives, the service had been for Randall merely a formality to be quickly dispatched. He had felt no sorrow for his father then, and he felt none now. He hoped that one day, he might be able to forgive him.

Though raising two sons by herself, while making ends meet was hard on his mother, for the next few years she seemed to do reasonably well mentally. Once again, Randall attributed this to a strong sense of purpose. During that time, though, he could hardly recall ever having seen her eating, but she smoked three packs of cigarettes daily, and her physical health steadily declined. Poor mom, he thought. She was old before her time.

His mind drifted back, and the memory of her emaciated body, drawn into a fetal position, was a painful one. He remembered sitting at her bedside, waiting. With advanced dementia, she could no longer talk; she just lay there, her arms and legs permanently flexed at the elbows and knees. Her only movement had been a continual facial grimacing, with accompanying tongue-rolling and smacking. The nursing home had smelled of urine, and he found the wretched place profoundly depressing. What a relief it had been when his mother had finally given up the ghost.

Even before his father's death, Randall was already familiar with the inside of a courtroom. These appearances were for minor offenses such as petty theft and vandalism. At age eighteen, Randall and a buddy had flushed lit cherry bombs down a park toilet, blowing it to smithereens, a large chunk of the porcelain striking Randall in the back as he fled out the bathroom door. Standing before old Judge McElhaney yet another time, he was reminded that he was now eighteen, and was therefore regarded as an adult. The judge, who was even more crochety than usual that particular day, had clearly seen Randall in his courtroom too many times, and summarily gave him the choice of going to jail or entering a branch of the armed forces. Randall knew he didn't want to go to jail, so the choice was a no-brainer; he eventually settled on the Marine Corps.

Looking back, Randall could see that enlisting in the Marines was undoubtedly the turning point of his life. Satisfied he'd found his niche with the Marines, he never looked back. He found his personality well-suited to the rigors and discipline of military life. He had needed someone to tell him what to do and when to do it, and he adjusted well to this mode of living.

Randall served two tours of duty in Vietnam, and later got in on the invasion of Grenada. He spent his second tour in Vietnam serving with the elite Force Reconnaissance unit. During that period, as a member of the standard six-man teams, he had participated on a good many patrols penetrating deep into North Vietnam. Trained in multiple insertion/

extraction techniques, Randall made several submarine and SCUBA insertions into enemy territory, as well as multiple high altitude low opening (HALO) parachute jumps. In terms of stealth and survival, he became the ultimate soldier. During his second tour, with Force Recon, he was awarded a second Silver Star and two Bronze Stars. He just missed the first Gulf War, having retired several months prior to that conflict.

Having put in his twenty years with the Marines, followed by a police career, Randall had never taken time for marriage and family. To outsiders, he appeared to be the classic workaholic, married to his career as a New York City homicide detective. When someone asked, as they did from time to time, his stock answer for not marrying was that he thought it unfair for the family of a big-city cop to be constantly held hostage by the threat of his death or disabling injury.

In his heart, though, Randall knew this wasn't a completely honest answer. He was able to admit, at least to himself, that the real truth was he was too emotionally distant for a serious relationship with a woman, let alone marriage. His inner realm where feelings dwelt was void, forever blighted by the awful things he'd seen and done. His repertoire of emotions limited to rage and lust, beyond these he could identify no other feelings, much less share them with anyone else.

He had once been told by an Army psychiatrist that the ability to block one's inner experience was clearly of value to the combat soldier. It enabled a man to maintain his sanity despite being immersed in the insanity of war. Randall had readily grasped this concept, and during his military service he had nurtured this ability, regarding emotions as shackles that held one back. But the doctor had gone on to say that his capacity to block feelings was no longer an advantage, and in fact had become an obstacle to his happiness. Randall, the doctor had explained, had never learned the full range of interaction with others, particularly women. Randall had thought this certainly made sense, but didn't have a clue about how to correct his deficiency. The solution, the psychiatrist said, was group therapy, but this prospect made Randall uneasy and he had not followed through with the doctor's suggestion.

A seeming contradiction to his deficiency in social skills was Randall's knack of connecting with children. As long as he could remember, he'd always been comfortable with "little people," as he affectionately referred to them. Children always seemed to love Randall, and it was obvious he loved them in return. With children, he speculated, he was able to freely give of himself, something he was unable to do with adults. Perhaps this was because with children, he felt it safe to open up and share of himself. This seemed somehow less risky, with less chance of rejection. He didn't have to fully understand it; just getting to romp with Drake's three boys was for Randall like finding an oasis in the desert.

He dated sporadically, but women generally found Randall too distant and emotionally unavailable. He had discovered that frequenting whorehouses during his Marine Corps stint had done nothing to equip him with the niceties of social etiquette necessary in dealing with the female gender. He felt awkward around women, and sensed they were equally uncomfortable with him.

It seemed to Randall that he'd reached a point where he found himself at a crossroads. If things didn't change for the better, he feared for his continued well-being. He was lonely, and was struggling with depression. Experiencing intrusive thoughts of being a "freak" or "weirdo", and having feelings of worthlessness, he'd finally been driven to see a psychiatrist. Always prideful of "not needing anybody" and "being a rock," he had become painfully aware that he needed others. He had always been a loner, and in the past was content spending lengthy amounts of time alone. But this had changed. He didn't know of what, but when alone he was afraid. Sometimes, when home alone, he experienced an overwhelming sense of desperation. It was as if something were trying to warn him of a deadly threat. The methods that in the past had worked for him psychologically were no longer applicable. His past had taken a terrible psychic toll, and now, it seemed, payment in full was due.

Taking his detective's shield from the bureau top, he paused for a moment to stare at it. Tim, he remembered, had always been so proud of what Randall was, and what he stood for. He had been so proud when his older brother was a career soldier, and equally so when he became a detective. Poor Tim, he pondered. He didn't have a chance from the get-go.

Following their father's death, Tim became a seriously troubled youth. By the time Randall was away in the service, his mother had become too feeble to keep a strong rein on Tim, and the boy had fallen in with bad company. He was soon on his way to becoming an

alcoholic like his father, and later became a junkie, addicted to heroin and cocaine. This led to fencing stolen goods to support his habit. For several years, Tim was in and out of jail. He didn't finish high school, and eventually descended into the hellish existence of the homeless, surviving on the street with little more than his wits.

Eventually finding his way to drug and alcohol rehabilitation through the courts, Tim had immersed himself in the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. He went back to school and earned his Graduate Equivalency Diploma, and later completed nursing school. Over the ensuing years, Tim had managed to stay clean and sober, but became something of a flake -- it seemed he became the temporary follower of every New Age philosophy that came along. At about that time, his two-year marriage ended in divorce.

After his divorce, Tim joined the Peace Corps, employed as a Registered Nurse rather than serving as an unpaid volunteer. His many travels had eventually taken him to India, where he embraced Buddhism. It was there that Tim at long last had seemed to find what he had searched for all his life. Although he had retained his U.S. citizenship, Tim had spent the last ten years of his life in India, and Randall had had no communication with him during that time.

Donning his jacket, Randall closed the wallet containing his shield and placed it in his breast pocket. He felt a heaviness pressing down on him, and for a moment he sat on the edge of his bed, still lost in thought. It seemed clear now that he and Tim had both spent their lives in search of something to believe in, an anchor to hold one fast through life's storms. It appeared his brother had at least completed his odyssey before being murdered. Glancing again at his image in the dresser mirror, he sighed. "I'm still searching," he whispered to himself.

Torn from his reverie by the telephone's insistent ringing, Randall picked up on the fourth ring.

"Detective Randall," he said curtly.

The voice that responded sounded nervous and unsettled. "Mr. Randall, this is Darrell Lankford, Chief Mortician here at the Metro Funeral Home. You'll recall that you made arrangements here for your brother's burial. I'm truly sorry to have to bother you this early, but we've discovered some serious irregularities in the condition of your brother's remains."

"What exactly do you mean?" asked Randall. "What sort of irregularities?"

"Well, we picked up the body at the airport early this morning, as per your previous arrangements. Upon arrival here, while moving the body to the casket you selected," Lankford stammered, "w-w-we noticed ... some, uh ... unusual f-findings on the body."

Randall, not in the best of moods to begin with, was becoming impatient. "Look, mister, as you can imagine, I'm not having a good day, and I haven't even had my first cup of coffee," he replied angrily. "So quit beating around the bush, and just tell me what the problem is."

"I I'm very s-sorry," the mortician sputtered, "b-but it's best w-we not discuss it over the phone. Y-You should c-come down and see it firsthand. T-Trust me when I t-tell you that you would definitely want to s-see this. So please, c-come right away."