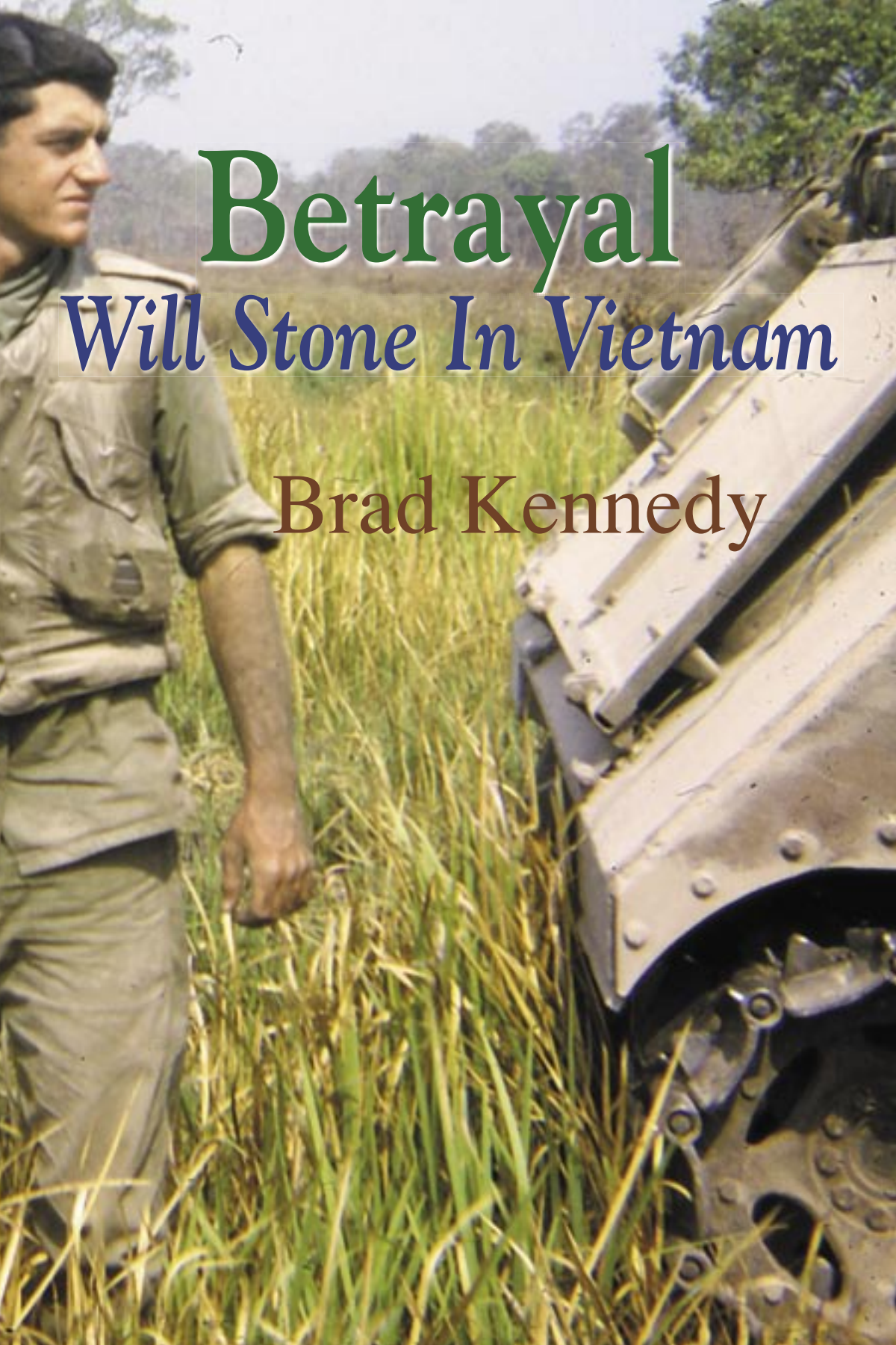




Betrayal

Will Stone In Vietnam

Brad Kennedy

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by Brad Kennedy

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Betrayal: Will Stone in Vietnam is a work of fiction. Any likeness of its characters and events to real people or situations, past or present, is purely coincidental and certainly unintentional, except for references to well-recognized historic personages and circumstances. Portions of this work have been previously released under the title *Heroes or Something*.

This story contains offensive language, including racial epithets that are an intrinsic part of a storyline that lays bare the relationship between racism and war. It seemed necessary to leave the language alone and to change, instead, our way of thinking about war and race.

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*To my parents with respect,
To my wife, Barbara, whose patience never fails,
To Greg, Starr, Sierra and Gianna, my hopes for the future,
To all those who suffered as a result of this war,
To the Vietnamese people, who have always deserved better. . .*

Part One: A Soldier's Call

Chapter 1

Learning To Kill

Two Bullets Marked “Campbell”

Will muscled himself into the seat next to Campbell on a bus bound for Andrews Air Force Base. From there, they would take the cross-country flight to San Francisco. It was one year to the day since Will's induction into the US Army in the summer of '65 at the age of twenty. The days leading up to his induction had been all he thought about—until Campbell.

“Lighten up, buddy,” Campbell said. “I’m not going anywhere. Where am I going to run?”



The buzz around the platoon had been about Campbell's capture. Will had been one of the first men back from leave as the unit formed up three hours earlier. Not that he was early. Will was barely on time. The Army did not much mind the infraction as long as the others were not too late, as long as they made the bus. The Army had bigger things to worry about that night, like shipping out a thousand troopers, including this flight risk Campbell.

“Campbell's back,” Specialist Fifth Class Montana told Will, nodding to their right. “They brought him back yesterday.” Will spotted Campbell seated on a wood and concrete bench. He sat with his hands between his legs, obscuring the manacles holding him to the first slat of the bench. Campbell stared bleakly between his legs. Montana went on, “Somebody's gonna have to guard him, once we get going.”

Will barely knew Campbell. *Why did he do it? How could he face himself if he made it? And now the humiliation of a desertion charge. Takes balls to buck the Army like that. But you can't hide from your conscience. Did he run with courage or out of fear?*

“Gonna drop the charges against him, I hear, so long as he gets on that ship for Nam,” Montana drawled.

Will glanced back at Montana. *Just like the Army. This guy's been AWOL for two months, probably trying to beat it across the border, and he's gonna get treated the same as the rest of us.*

"Probably they'll have to issue live ammo to whoever guards him," continued Montana. "Bastard might run again."

Will nodded. *Don't wish him harm. I guess where we're headed is going to be bad enough. But how can there be discipline without reprisals? For a US like me or Campbell, the reward of rank is meaningless. There are only reprisals.*

"Heard if you shoot one of our own, like if you're guarding Campbell and you kill him, you get transferred to another unit," whispered Montana. "Cause of the possible hard feelings, you know. Might not even go to Nam."

Will searched Montana's face for any hint of satisfaction from the situation. Montana had been busted from staff sergeant back to private for slugging an MP before working his way back up to E-5, the same pay grade as a buck sergeant. All that had so conditioned Montana's animal cunning that he sensed what Will was looking for.

Montana carried fifteen pounds more lean muscle and was half a head taller than the five-foot-seven-inch, hundred-fifty-pound Will. Rarely did Montana confront bigger men, but he had a menacing way of slouching when he confronted smaller ones. Defying Will's scrutiny with his own steely glare, Montana dipped his knees and hunched his upper back just enough to lower himself to Will's eye level. *Montana wants the job. He might even take pleasure in killing Campbell. He'd like boasting the first kill, even if it were one of us. He'd like it better if it got him out of this boat ride and into some cushy assignment in Europe. I had him pegged all along, and he knows it.*

"Gotta go," said Montana, clapping Will on the back and hanging on to his shoulder. Abandoning his drawl for a moment, Montana squinted at Will and grinned, "You'd want the job, wouldn't you?" Then he moved on without waiting for a reply.

Will watched the returning soldiers in their civvies filing past the gate to the troop area, past the handcuffed Campbell. Many stopped next to Campbell's bench long enough for a farewell embrace with their sweethearts or parents. Campbell largely went unnoticed. Despite all the talk, he was not so important to anyone—except to Will.

"You been drinking today, Stone?"

"No, sir," Will said.

"Didn't think you had," said Lieutenant Brown, the How Battery Executive Officer. "See the armorer and draw out your M-14. Here are two live rounds. Stick them in a magazine. Lock, but don't load. You're guarding Campbell. Understand, Stone?"

"Yessir," answered Will.

"Stick to him like glue. Don't let him take a piss without you. We don't want to lose him again. Is that clear, Stone?"

“Yessir.”

“If he runs, aim low!”



“I said where am I going to run?” Campbell asked. “We’re on a fuckin’ bus.”

Will glared back. “I have no quarrel with you,” he answered, “but I’m your guard, not your buddy.”

Campbell smirked and poked Will with his elbow.

“So don’t take off on me,” Will said, patting the M-14 between his legs.

Campbell’s face flushed, and he leaned toward Will until their faces were no more than a foot apart. The large pores on Campbell’s nose and the pockmarks on his cheeks momentarily distracted Will. He noticed the bead of sweat on Campbell’s upper lip and the throbbing vein on the top of his forehead where his hairline had receded. He wondered what Campbell noticed about him.

Campbell might have zeroed in on Will’s dark-haired cowlick if Will had not been wearing his regulation-issue, olive drab baseball cap. Campbell might have noticed the dimple that often appeared on Will’s left cheek when he smiled, but Will harbored no cheer now. Campbell, though, should have recognized from the set of Will’s square jaw and his stiff neck on broad shoulders, or from the penetrating, tight-lipped stare he now managed through those icy blue eyes, that Will meant business.

“Back off,” Will said. “It could be a long night. You better get some sleep.”

“You better not,” Campbell said. “I have friends on this bus, you know.” He laughed and turned away from Will.

Will studied Campbell for several moments before leaning his own head back against the seat. Once more, Will brooded over the events of a year ago, the events that led to his induction.

Josh’s Choice

“What exactly is going on here?” a voice called from the foot of the porch stairs. The glare of two flashlight beams spotlighted Will with Jen in his arms on the porch. They eased themselves apart, squinting to make out the two men in uniform climbing the stairs behind the rising light beams. Josh, Will’s roommate and long-time mentor, was sidestepping away from them.

Will had arrived at his rooming house only minutes earlier. Baffled by the commotion, Will had waved for Josh, who was a World War II vet to come to the porch. Josh told him that Mr. Lyons, Jen's father and their landlord, was banging on the stair-side of the basement door and in other ways creating an awful racket. Then, Jen had burst forth in tears and, before Will knew it, run into his arms.

The sheriff tracked Josh's movements with his light beam, while his deputy kept his light on Will and Jen. "Well, what we got here, boy?" asked the sheriff. "Where you think you going? You on the wrong side of the tracks for this time of night, ain't yeh, boy?" The sheriff stood at the top of the stairs one foot in front of the other, leaning forward like he was looking into a dark hole rather than at a man's face. His leg muscles bulged his trousers and his sinewy fingers and forearms tightened around his flashlight and his nightstick. The moonlight glistened on his sweaty scalp through his crew cut.

"Well, sir, you see—" Josh said as the sheriff's deputy stationed himself at the top of the stairs behind the sheriff.

"You, quiet over there, boy," the sheriff drawled, straightening himself erect and relaxing some. "When I want to hear from you, I'll let you know. Don't you worry 'bout that."

Josh looked the sheriff in the eye and nodded.

Will recognized the sheriff's deputy as having graduated from his high school two years ahead of him, although he did not know him. *Played right tackle the year the football team was undefeated. A real bruiser, goes along with the group more than he should, gets carried away.*

"Now you pay attention, little lady," the sheriff continued, shining his flashlight in Jen's face, "you may learn something valuable here tonight that may save you from learning something the hard way when you're older."

"How about we turn the porch light on, sir?" Will said.

The chief redirected his beam at Will's face. "When I want the porch light on, I'll see that it's on. I don't need any help from the likes of you to do my thinking for me." Turning to Jen, he added, "Go ahead and turn on the overhead light out here, young lady."

Jen complied, looking first to the sheriff before easing her way back to Will's side.

"That's better," the sheriff continued, taking a careful look at each before his scrutiny returned to Jen. "How old are you, miss?"

"Sixteen next month."

"That's nice," the sheriff said, turning to Will, "and are you fifteen, too, mister?"

Will shook his head.

"For the record, how old are you?" the sheriff asked.

"Twenty," Will said.

"Interesting, twenty and fifteen," the sheriff said. "That could be something, you know. Let me tell you something, mister. You been protected. You been protected in this town for years. I know you know why—your father's partners are big here. What you may not know is all that's over now, as of tonight. You understand? From now on, you gonna be treated just like any other wise-ass in this town. You got that straight, mister?"

The deputy was looking over Jenny until the banging in the basement resumed. The light above the side porch next door came on. The sheriff looked over as the neighbors next door came out on their side porch and waved to him. The sheriff smiled at Will. "They're the ones who called about all the ruckus here. I was ready to turn in for the night till they called. You can bet that call pleased my missus. Now what the hell is that banging, Stone?"

"Old Man Lyons, I guess, must be locked in the basement," Will said.

"You guess, huh," the sheriff said, staring at Will before turning to Jen. "Is that your pap in the basement?"

Jen nodded.

"Well, why don't you go open the door for him, little lady, and bring him here?"

While she did that, the chief eyed Josh's face once more and then gazed at Will. "I know you just had some sort of confrontation with your old man down in the center of town—at this time of night. Are you now telling me this young lady's pap locked hisself in the basement by some kind of accident? Think good before you answer, mister. This is your chance to get off on the right foot with me."

"Hey, Sheriff," Josh said, "isn't it me you really want? There's no point in badgering the kid."

The chief winced, turned slowly to Josh and once more sized him up. A smirk crossed his face as he said, "You was being so nice and polite I almost forgot about you." Then he glanced back at the deputy and said, "Hey, rookie—oops, sorry—Denton, go down to the squad car and fetch from the trunk that black hood with the drawstring around the opening—the one we use for moving prisoners still uncooperative after they's cuffed.

"I hope we won't need it," he continued, grinning at Josh, "but we better be ready. It's in a cardboard box."

"What does the box say, Sheriff?" Denton asked. "Hood?"

"Hood? Nah, too easy, something like 'Head Restraint.' Best you tote that shotgun in the trunk back here, too."

Jenny burst through the screen door. Her father followed tentatively. She positioned herself next to Will, and her father stopped in the doorway with the screen door half open.

"You're still drivin' over-the-road," the sheriff said. "You been drinking, Lyons?"

"Just a little since I got home. Got in about two hours ago."

"What you banging on down in the cellar this time of night?"

"What'd they tell you?" Old Man Lyons asked, nodding at Josh and Will.

"Nothing, and I wouldn't have believed them if they did. Now what the hell's going on?"

Lyons stepped into the light a couple of paces and glanced at Jen. "She gotta be here?"

The sheriff gave a nod. "I'll say when she stays and when she goes. Where's your missus, anyway? What in hell is going on here?"

"Last I could tell, Sheriff, the missus was inside throwing up," Old Man Lyons said. "Look, maybe we all just had a little too much to drink."

"Takes more than a little to lock yourself in the cellar, don't it?" the sheriff asked.

"I didn't lock myself in no cellar. Somebody did that for me—from the upstairs side. Don't know who. Coulda been my missus. It's been done before."

"So you saying, Lyons, you all were getting along all right, 'cept maybe you were getting too loud cause of the drinking. That it?"

"Well, yeah, Sheriff," Lyons said, looking at Jen, "'cept there was one thing—"

"Young lady," the sheriff said, "go see if you can fetch your momma. But you be careful not to rush her none. You hear me?" Jen re-entered the house. The sheriff looked at Old Man Lyons and said, "Go ahead."

"We was getting along OK, like you said, Sheriff. These guys are OK. I didn't even know Stone was here till I come out here with you—"

"Didn't know he was out here on the porch with your daughter?" the sheriff said.

"What? She was right there in the next room asleep the whole time. Like I said, we was knockin' back a few and getting' along just fine. But—"

"But what, man?" said the sheriff.

"But there was this moment. I'm not sure when or for how long, when—maybe it was the drink—I just got the feeling that that buck over there," Lyons said looking at Josh, "was feeling just a little too cozy toward my missus."

The sheriff leaned close to Old Man Lyons's ear and said, "You ever see or hear anything?"

"No, Sheriff. It was just this feeling come over me. I sensed something, you know, not right."

"Where's your wife, man? Get your wife out here, but don't you say nothing to her. Let me do the talking."

Once Old Man Lyons went in the house, the sheriff smiled and said to Josh, "You got your teat in a wringer here, boy?"

"Hello?" Mrs. Lyons called as she made her way onto the porch.

"Come on out here, Mrs. Lyons," the sheriff said, stepping forward to hold the door for her. "We're trying to straighten out a situation that never should have occurred."

"Now, Mrs. Lyons, the first thing you need to know is that we're here to help you, to defend you, to protect your reputation, if you will, as a lady. You got nothing to worry 'bout, so long as you can help us work things back to the way they supposed to be. Now, there are a lot of people talking 'bout you and that fellow over there, Josh. You know him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"What they're saying isn't nice, Mrs. Lyons. It's not something you would want said about you if you had a choice. Some are saying they've seen you—actually seen you—in a position with this *boy* that no respectable white woman would ever put herself in. Now Mrs. Lyons, I ask you, knowing you are going to give me the right answer, you are a respectable woman, aren't you?"

"I feel awfully weak, Sheriff," she said. "I was sick inside just a few minutes ago. I need to go back inside now."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Lyons. I asked you, you are a respectable woman, aren't you?"

"Yes, I try to be."

"You either are or you ain't. Now which is it, Mrs. Lyons?"

"Yes, I am."

"Am what?"

"You know none of this is true!" Josh shouted.

"You keep your trap closed, boy," the sheriff said. He strode three paces closer to Josh and brandished his nightstick before Josh's eyes, "Or you'll be tasting this here nightstick for a long time."

"Now, Mrs. Lyons, you either are or you ain't. Now say it. Which are you? Let me hear you say it."

"I am. I am respectable. I need to go in, Sheriff."

"Of course, of course, of course, you're respectable. We know that, Mrs. Lyons. That's why we are here now—to defend your honor. And of course you can go inside after one more question. This can be as easy as

you want to make it. Now, Mrs. Lyons, being you are a good and respectable white woman, it goes without saying that if some people did see you in a position with this colored boy that no respectable woman would put herself in, it can only mean that colored forced you somehow into that position, isn't that so?"

"Let me go inside."

"Answer the question first."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"You know what I want to hear. Say it, Mrs. Lyons—"

"Just how low will you go, Captain?" Josh called out.

"You had your warning, boy," the sheriff shouted, bearing down on Mrs. Lyons. "Now—"

"Never you mind her, Sheriff. You didn't answer my question," Josh said.

"He's been drinking, sir," Will said, tugging on the sheriff's sleeve.

"Quiet, you," the sheriff said, wrenching his arm free.

"Don't you worry 'bout that, Will," Josh said. "This man has me real sober."

"I have to go in—" Mrs. Lyons said.

"You go in, Mrs. Lyons," Josh raised his voice. "The sheriff here has his hands full. He just don't know it yet."

"Well, well, well, boy," the sheriff said, turning toward Josh. "You asked for it, and you gonna get it." Staring and nodding at Josh, the sheriff crouched and swallowed hard, then sprang forward, poking his forefinger into Josh's chest and shouting, "Kneel, boy!" As he did, he glanced back at Denton and shouted, "Hood!"

In that moment Josh clamped his left hand around the sheriff's forefinger. He bent it back so hard and fast that the sheriff was on his knees with tears in his eyes. "How quick the tables can turn," Josh said, holding fast to the sheriff's bent finger and leaning so his face was hardly a foot above the sheriff's. "Now tell your man to stand down."

"Do what he says, Dent."

"Sheriff," Josh said, "everyone here knows that stuff you were peddlin' never happened, but you couldn't let it go, could you? You had to try and make somethin' of nothin'. Now that we understand the problem, you ready to find a solution?"

"Yes!"

Jenny opened the screen door and stepped onto the porch, catching her breath with her hand when she saw what was happening. As soon as she stepped out of the way alongside Will, her father reappeared in the doorway and gulped.

"Now, Sheriff," Josh said, "you can have your finger in one piece because I will let it go, provided you can let go of this whole incident here tonight. Well?"

"Ooooh! Yes."

"Rookie," Josh called, "is the sheriff here a respectable white man? He hasn't shown me much honor. Can he be trusted to keep a deal?"

The deputy froze. "For God's sake, answer the man," the sheriff cried.

"Yes, he can," Denton called back.

"OK, then here's the deal, Sheriff. I let go of your finger, I walk out of here right now, you never see me again, and this whole incident never happened. Nothing happened here tonight, Sheriff. You got it?"

"All right," the Sheriff yelled. "Anything!"

"And what about you, rookie?" Josh called out. "Can you keep a deal? Even if the sheriff orders you to break it?"

"Yes!" shouted Denton.

"Yes, what?" Josh said, grinning and shaking his head.

"Yes, sir," Denton shouted.

"Thank you," Josh said softly, looking across the porch at Denton. Then he turned his attention to Will and whispered. "I gotta enjoy this 'cause I could be payin' for it the rest of my life. Now, Will, listen up! It's time we parted ways. We had our time and it was good. I'm sorry I couldn't have been stronger for you this past year. I dumped a lot of stuff your way, but this one's on me. You stay out of this one, son, you hear? There's gonna be hell to pay, and there's no point the two of us payin' the same bill."

Josh glanced at the sheriff and then Denton, before continuing. "These guys will never keep any deal, but what can I do? I gotta give 'em the chance, right? I may not spout the verses or sing the songs, but I am a Christian.

"Denton, get that hood restraint on the sheriff here now," Josh said, increasing the pressure on the sheriff's finger. "You tie that cord just as tight around his neck as you was going to around mine." The sheriff squirmed but submitted to the restraint because Josh maintained just enough pressure on the sheriff's finger to break his will.

"Now, Will, when I spoke up, that was for Mrs. Lyons—to spare her this grief, which maybe I brought on her. But I spoke up for me, too. I'll play their game only to the point where it would change who I am. What you do is who you are. Remember that, Will. You do what's right and you can walk tall. I won't kneel to be brought down. Kneel only to pray."

Josh looked around at the others. "Everyone, no surprises," he called out. "I be letting go of his finger and walking out of here for good. Will,

goodbye. Jen, goodbye. Say goodbye to your families and thank them for allowing me close to them. It's time now."

Josh gave the sheriff's finger a little twist before pushing the sheriff away with it as he let go. The sheriff dropped to the floor and writhed in pain before starting to free himself from the head restraint. During that time, Josh strode to the other side of the porch, eyeballed Denton, and stepped past him and down the stairs. He was twenty feet down the walk when the sheriff, still on the floor, called to Denton, "Where is he? Stop him."

"What?" Denton said.

"Stop him, goddammit," the sheriff yelled as he fought to his knees, still working on the knot in the drawstring around his neck. "You can't let 'im bag me like a coon an' jus' walk away."

Denton snapped the shotgun to his shoulder as Will cried out "No!" But the deputy fired away. Josh flew face forward to the ground halfway down the front sidewalk.

Will recoiled from the blast, grabbed Jenny and turned her away from Josh, burying her face momentarily in his arms. Raising his hands to her shoulders, he looked directly into her eyes. "Jen, go inside to the phone," he said. "Dial Operator and tell her we need an ambulance here. Tell her it's 'cause a cop's been shot. OK?"

"I'll do it," she said.

Once he let her go, Will bounded toward the stairs but the sheriff, finally free of the hood, intercepted him. "Whoa, Stone," he said, catching him with an iron grip around the chest. Will saw Josh struggling to his knees. Once Will stopped resisting, the sheriff eased his grip. Nobody moved or spoke. Lights came on in the houses nearby and families emerged on their front porches. All eyes were upon the fallen man as slowly he got to his feet in a stooped posture. The back of his shirt splattered with blood, he twisted and turned to straighten himself as he hobbled sideways as much as forward. Josh teetered, looked around, then wobbled ahead. His stride lengthened and his chest swelled with each step.

"Dent," the sheriff said, tightening his grip around Will, who resisted. The deputy caught the sheriff's nod, shouted "Halt," returned the shotgun to his shoulder, and fired once more. Josh again flew face forward. The neighbors gasped and watched Josh struggle to reach his knees again. This time his efforts were futile, though he kept struggling until he collapsed.

Will shook himself loose of the sheriff's grip and headed down the stairs to where Josh lay. The sheriff glanced about at the neighbors and called out, "You all saw it. Everybody saw it. That nigger resisted arrest, assaulted

an officer, and started to run when Denton called 'Halt!' Anybody here see it different?"

Will was the first to reach Josh. Moments later, the sheriff paused there but, seeing no sign of life from Josh, passed them by in his rush to the next door neighbors' side porch. Denton hung over the porch railing, puking.

Will knelt and leaned forward so he could speak in his friend's ear. "Josh, can you hear me, Josh? Are you dead?"

"Feel like it," Josh answered, opening an eye and moving only his lips. "They watching me?"

"Not now," Will said, straightening up enough to look around. "How do you feel?"

"Breathing funny. No feelin' below my waist. Other than that, just plain vanilla lousy," Josh said. He wheezed a few seconds before continuing. "Will, I'm a man an' nobody is gonna force me to be anything less. Walk tall, Will. Walk tall. You remember that, son."

A middle-aged man in robe and pajamas hustled across the street. "Has someone called for an ambulance?" he yelled.

"Now that's nice of you to worry, but I'll take care of that," answered the sheriff, returning from the neighbors. "That's what we got radios for. I'm just gonna see if somehow I can make this boy more comfortable first."

"I'm a doctor. You get that ambulance. I'll do what I can for him here." The man glanced over his shoulder. "My wife's right behind me with my bag."

Will looked up and saw Jen wink at him. She bent toward him. "Mom made the call," she whispered.

"Will, I told you something important just before," Josh added, sweating profusely now. "It's time you got on with the rest of your life. Best leave me be, Will."

An ambulance ground to a halt in front of the growing commotion. The driver cranked down his window. "Is this where the cop was shot?" he called.

"Yes!" Will shouted without hesitation.

"What do you mean, a cop shot?" the sheriff said as he strode toward Will.

"Somebody must have thought you were down, Sheriff," Will said, still kneeling.

"Jesus Christ!" the sheriff said, shaking his head. "Don't you think of pulling out of here till I'm through with you, Mister Stone."

"You want to talk to me, you call my old man's attorney," Will said. "You know who he is."

"Ha! Yes, I do," the sheriff said with a smirk. "He's the one that told me I shouldn't protect you."

"Yeah, well, not protecting us and shooting us in the back aren't the same thing," Will answered. "I'll be following that ambulance to the hospital."

"That boy is my prisoner—what's left of him."

"That man is my hero—what's left of him."

"All right, get out of here," the sheriff said and walked away.

Jenny squatted to say goodbye to Josh. The ambulance squad slipped a blanket under him to lift him onto a litter. While they loaded Josh into the ambulance, Will hugged Jenny and they said their goodbye. "Tell your mom, I'll be back tomorrow for our stuff, OK? The world is a dangerous place, Jen, unless you have someone protecting you. That's what your mom and dad are trying to do when they make their rules. It's best you listen."

When the ambulance pulled out, Will was behind it in his rat of a roadster. He sat in the hospital waiting room for two hours, replaying in detail what had happened to Josh. Finally, an intern sat next to him. "Mr. Wyatt will be out of surgery shortly. He appears to be in stable condition. It may be some time, though, before we know whether he'll use his legs again. Not much point in waiting. He won't be awake for hours and, besides, we'll need permission from someone in authority for you to see him. He's a prisoner."



Campbell stirred in his seat, causing Will to return his attention to the present.

Campbell shows no remorse, no shame. What if he runs? Say at the airport he gets his chance and makes a break for it. Would I waste him? I'd run after him, tackle him. I could run till he wore down. But what if I let my guard down and he got the jump on me? What if he kicked me in the nuts and I started after him but was gonna lose him? Say I yelled Halt! but he kept going and was going to turn a corner to who knows where. Say it was clear behind him so I didn't have to worry about a stray round. Say it was take the shot or lose him. Say I dropped to one knee and raised the barrel and got him in my sights and could squeeze off a round. Would I just tear off his leg, or maybe miss and blow him away? Is that my duty? This guy's a deserter I'm ordered to guard. Montana says if I shoot him, I might even get shipped to Europe. Could see Sarah while she's studying in Paris; miss this whole thing.

Will saw the drill in his mind—kneeling, aiming, firing, the muzzle flash, the ear-piercing crack, the recoil, and the sight of Campbell flying

forward for a face-down landing with a piece of his right hip blowing out sideways. *Where the hell are the cuffs? Why didn't they just give me the cuffs, so I didn't have to worry about him running. No warning shot! I didn't have time. Did I shoot him to get out of going to Nam? Maybe I'm not so different from Campbell. At least he didn't shoot anybody to get out of this thing. Shooting him would be a heavy load to carry the rest of my life, especially if I didn't go to Nam. How's it different from them shooting Josh?*

It was dark and quiet on the bus. Most troopers were lost in fond reflection upon their fourteen-day leave, unwilling to give in to the quiet despair of the few who already had looked ahead to the year's tour of duty in Vietnam. One by one, though, each would yield to the irresistible fascination of the unknown. Trained to ignore discomfort and accept hardship, each still fell sway to one inescapable fear: *Will I be back?* The doors closed, the engine started, and for them time stood still, at least as it was ordinarily counted. Days, weeks, years no longer mattered. They would suffer them without reckoning—if only the tour of duty would stop short of forever, if only the Estimated Termination of Service were this side of eternity.

Not even Will could take heart in the adventure ahead. *It comes down to getting back or not, though we don't have much control over that.* He stopped short of thinking, *Nothing else much matters.* A lot mattered to Will. The past year had reshaped his understanding and expectations, but it also left his purposes intact even as he continued to think things through.

"Why?" Will called aloud, surprising himself as much as Campbell.

"What?" said Campbell, waking up. "Why what?"

"Why'd ya take off?" Will asked.

"Why not?"

Will waited, but Campbell held back. "Were you trying to make it across the Canadian border?" Will asked.

"Hell, no," Campbell said. "Stone, get this straight. I don't give a crap! Got it? I just went back to living my own life. I don't care about your Army and what it wants. I was having a good time on leave so I figured I'd take a little longer. What can they do to me? Send me to Vietnam? Can they make me run away and throw my whole life away? I'm not that scared of them, Stone. I'm only here because I gotta be. You're my guard, but I'm not afraid of you or the whole damn Army. You know what we always say. 'They can work me long, but they can't work me hard.' Now you tell me why you're so gung ho. You were drafted. You should feel the same way I do."

"Look, I was ordered to guard you," said Will.

"Of course you were," said Campbell, "and I bet it breaks your heart. But you're still gung ho. If anyone of these NCOs says boo, you jump. They trained you better than they could the rest of us."

"It's not training," responded Will. "It's a sense of duty. I believe in what our country stands for, and I'm determined not to let it down."

Campbell faced Will directly and whispered, "Well, Stone, then this country has shown you something it hasn't shown me."

Will kept still, as he tried to make out Campbell's meaning. "I thought I was supposed to catch some zzzz's," Campbell said.

"Yeah, sorry," said Will. *Why the hell did I get into that with him?* He leaned his head back again and tried once more to put the past year in perspective. *I'm not ready to start giving speeches urging men to their graves, but this is the right thing to do. If you believe that you gotta do this, you don't talk about it. It's a private commitment you nurse inside you until, when the time comes, you do it. Truth only exists in action and sacrifice. Each risk is a new test of will. It's a private commitment between you and...who? Between you and who you would be, and those you would honor.*

Honor? Will had only to think of his father, Sam, killed in the Phillipines with the Seabees in World War II. What Will knew of his natural father came largely from the glowing tributes of Harry, his uncle who adopted him and who himself had been wounded defending an Aleutian airstrip under Japanese attack. Then there was one of Will's trusty scout leaders, Bill Corbett, who stormed the beaches of Normandy in order to battle on to Berlin. And, of course, there was Josh, who'd been a much decorated squad sergeant in a segregated cavalry unit in the battle for France. Will knew about honor.

A Trojan Horse

Will gazed at Campbell snoozing next to him as the bus pulled into the airport. Alarm shot through Will's every faculty. He had to be ready in case Campbell found a chance to bolt. He had to be ready for anything. Most on the bus were fast asleep. Four or five rows back, however, an ongoing conversation continued. The soldiers involved deliberately raised their voices.

"He's no different than we are, I tell you," said one voice. "I've talked to him. He's an ordinary guy, not some devil with horns. He just wasn't in any hurry to get his ass shipped to Vietnam. Who is?"

"So why they gotta guard him with live ammo, anyway? He's going," another said. "He said he was. That's good enough for me."

"Fuckin' Stone is gung ho enough to use his '14 on him. Somebody's got to talk to that boy."

Will could not place the voices. He could not even keep straight when one voice stopped and another started. *Can't let these guys stop me from doing what I gotta do.*

"A lot of what Campbell says makes sense," the conversation continued. "Stone ought to just talk to him."

"Campbell, Campbell." Will poked him. "Better wake up. We're at the airport."

Campbell blew out a short breath and shook his head. "So what?" he mumbled.

"Wake up, will ya?"

Campbell straightened up, looked around, and smiled. "All right, sweetheart, but how come everyone else is still sleeping?"

"What did you mean when you said this country hadn't shown you anything?"

Campbell scratched under his right arm. "Huh?"

"I want to know what makes you so sour on everything," Will said.

"Stone, goddammit, I'm not sour on life. It's death I abhor, and the Green Machine is the grim reaper," Campbell said. "I'll let you in on something. My father was killed in Korea. He was an FO, a forward observer, got it, like they wanted me to be and like you'll probably wind up being. The army, your sacred country, didn't do shit for us—not for my mother, not for me, not for my little brothers. I was a twelve-year-old kid then. My mother has been working herself ragged ever since to keep us all going. I was just getting to the point where I could start helping."

"So you deserted? I mean, how's that helping?" Will said.

"C'mon, Stone," Campbell said. "My father wasn't any lifer. He was some guy who got ripped away from his family to fight in some war in which he had no stake or care. He was an English professor. You hear me, Stone? I said my father taught English lit at a college. He really was a great guy. He cared about people. He cared about me and my mother. One day he got the letter to show up. He wasn't a romantic like you. He had no choice, more like the rest of us. So he went and that was that. Now you tell me, Stone, you think my mother wasn't glad to have me around that extra time, before we put out? I mean, do you think I didn't know they were going to catch up to me there? Gimme a break, will ya?"

"This may surprise you, Stone, but my mother is an Italian immigrant. That's right. My father met her when he was studying in Europe. She's a classy lady, but once we lost my father, everybody saw her as just another wop with a language problem. If you can imagine what it meant to her that my father was an English professor, then you can understand what my

following in his footsteps meant, too. I'm not doing it just for that. You couldn't. My father passed along the love of it, and it's just my bent. I'm not apologizing for it, not in any way. But here I am a Ph.D. candidate, and you can see what's happening."

"You're what?" Will asked.

"I have my Master's Degree, and I am working at Pasadena in a doctoral program. I'm part of the English department, Stone."

"What do you teach, Campbell?"

"Freshman Comp, what else? The point is I have this sense of foreboding. I see happening to me what happened to my father. And for what? That's what I'd like to know. For what? Just because some politician doesn't know how to get out of a box?"

This guy's trying to con me, and I'm falling for it. I've got to think clearly. I can't let him get away on me. I've got to do what I've got to do. Yet there's something to what he says if it's true he was right there in his hometown. But how do I know that? I can't just take his word for it, but I can't discount it either. It all comes down to if he runs or not, and that's up to him, not me. If he goes, then this is all bullshit and whatever happens is on his head. If he doesn't, then I'm not hurting him by reserving judgment. Either way, whatever he says is irrelevant to my actions, so there's no harm in listening. It may count toward my future opinion of him, but that's all. For tonight, it still comes down to if he runs or not.

"For what, Stone?" Campbell said. "Don't have an answer for me, huh? Why are we in Vietnam? I somehow thought you might be the man to have an answer ready."

"Why don't you lay off, Campbell?"

"Should I go back to sleep?"

Will bit his tongue. *I deserved that.*

"Actually, Stone," Campbell said, "having watched you for a time, I'm prepared to make some concessions. You're not as bad as you might seem. If someone must guard me with live ammo, you're probably the best of those they'd consider."

Will pursed his lips and blew a long, silent whistle.

"I'm dead serious," said Campbell. "Let's hope it won't come to that."

"It's up to you," said Will.

"You don't quit, do you?" said Campbell. "However, besides being, shall we say, relentless, you have several other qualities that are underrated around here. You are moderately intelligent, responsible to a fault, logical, and most importantly, remarkably open-minded—all qualities any man should want in his son, or, I guess for that matter, in his keeper if he must have one. But by themselves, these qualities are not enough. You

also must be knowledgeable, and that can be a life's work before you're entitled to an informed opinion on some matters.

"This Vietnam thing probably falls in this last category. Nonetheless, the urgency of the subject to us accords us the right to some shortcuts in forming our opinions, but, of course, only at the expense of the quality of those opinions. It may be true, as is commonly said in these circles, that opinions are like assholes in that we all have them, but they don't all smell quite as sweet."

Will thought before responding, "I accept what you say about the need for our opinions to account for the facts as well as to be, say, logically consistent. However, in the matter of these smells, I must defer to your far greater experience."

"Witty, I left out *witty*," Campbell laughed aloud. "Stone, have you studied Philosophy?"

"The basics," Will said.

"Now in Philosophy, we encounter arguments all the time that are exceedingly difficult to disprove but near impossible to believe. How do we deal with those arguments, Stone?"

"Go back to the base assumption, sir," Will answered. "There's always an unsubstantiated assumption on which the whole argument rests."

"Now Stone, please tell me upon what prime assumption you base your argument that duty calls you to Vietnam."

"You're a regular, fuckin' Trojan horse, aren't you, Campbell?"

"From Pasadena, I told you," Campbell whispered politely. "Now may we continue, Mr. Stone?"

"*Specialist Fourth Class* to you, Private," Will answered. "We're stopping now. We gotta get ready."

Campbell twisted at the waist and faced Will directly. "We're sitting on a rainy airstrip in the middle of the night, and there are no planes out there yet. There's no reason to rush out there. Now let's cut through the bullshit, Mr. Stone. Having gotten this far in this conversation, it's clear you're governed by reason, not authority. And that means you're no more dependable a soldier than I am. You are just of a different opinion—right now. Your first assumption, please."

"I have none."

"That's unacceptable, Stone," said Campbell. "You know damn well there is always an underlying assumption, and you are too analytical a thinker not to know what yours is."

"I don't want to get into this now."

"You gave me the right to ask my question when you engaged me in this conversation," Campbell went on. "Now we both are obliged to see where it leads, not as adversaries where one is victor and the other

vanquished, but together where whatever truth we uncover is celebrated as our common prize. We are either seekers of truth, or we are not. It is this rational faculty that sets man apart from the rest of nature. Now, you have put your faith in the rules of reason when others have placed theirs elsewhere. You must step down a level if you would have it otherwise. Mind you, I never said you were humble."

"You really are going to make an issue of this even if I just want to beg off?" asked Will.

"If I don't, you will, Stone, someday," Campbell responded. "If you live long enough."

"Look, it's not that I don't trust myself," Will said. "OK, give me a second. This is just between you and me. I'm here because it would be unjust to let others do the fighting and dying for me, assuming it was my turn to go."

Campbell leaned back away from Will and rubbed his chin. Will looked at him anxiously.

"I'm not going to laugh at you, Stone. This could be, as we said before, dead serious, and your nobility has not gone unnoticed. Yes, there's a sort of *noblesse oblige* about it. Now, you tell me, Stone, make believe you're looking at someone else for a while, tell me, what is your first assumption, your first assumption?"

Oh, damn, I can't believe I didn't think this through. "I didn't qualify that this was a just war," said Will. "I just assumed that someone should be fighting it."

Campbell gave Will a hint of a nod before offering, "Stone, theologians debate just wars. Diplomats at best claim their necessity. Is our fight necessary?"

"The President says so," Will said.

"Isn't that the same one who said he would not send American boys to fight a war that ought to be fought by Asian boys?" Campbell asked. He bobbed up out of his seat past Will and into the aisle.

Will dropped his brow in his hand for a moment's respite before quickly rising. "Wait up, Campbell," Will called in a whisper. "Wait up."

Campbell whispered back to him, "Just stretching, Stone. We all can use a good stretch now and then, can't we?"

Chapter 2

Troop Transport To Vietnam

Aboard In San Francisco Bay

Soldiers everywhere crowded the deck of the troop ship, now three days at sea with twenty to go. They sprawled anywhere they could to snooze in the life-giving sea air. They lined the ship's rails, gazing at the ocean's movements, conversing with anyone who would listen about what they left behind and what might lie ahead. They read dime-store novels with covers typically featuring a sultry blonde in a tight, red satin gown that wrapped from front to back. They read over and over the letters from home they received before setting sail and wrote multiple replies they could not mail until reaching port. They sat on deck in tight little circles playing poker for nickels and dimes. When playing for their paychecks or shooting craps, they huddled in corners by the stairwells. The more days at sea, the fewer games there were of this sort, as the stakes fell prey to the same hands.

Only a little more than half of the twelve hundred officers and men on board could rest on deck at any one time. The others remained below, either working at various duties or awaiting their turn in the open air. Together, they represented the first of the three squadrons in the armored cavalry regiment shipping over. Dressing them all in green jungle fatigues and combat boots did not obscure that each was his own man. One had only to look past the uniform to see as many differences as similarities. Each had his own story, his own hopes and dreams. Out of this individuality was born a preciousness, a common and equal claim to life each staked for himself. Yet they knew, they all could feel down to the marrow in their bones, that this claim was not necessarily recognized by the US Army and that it was surely contested by the enemy they were journeying to meet.

Beneath the Golden Gate

At first, Will was grateful to set foot aboard ship, because it meant he no longer had to guard Campbell. But a sense of foreboding accompanied him up the gangway early that first morning, a gnawing suspicion he was prone to seasickness. Later that evening, it gave him an additional concern as he jammed the side rail with the rest of the troops grumbling about

having spent the entire day docked in San Francisco harbor, when they might never get another chance to see the city by the bay.

Early the following morning, Will readied his nerves for the voyage. Long ago, he had concluded boredom to be the Army's greatest hardship to date, so he was amused to catch himself habitually repeating one of Josh's old litanies, "All things pass in time." Notwithstanding his misgivings, Will welcomed the word that buzzed aboard the ship just after breakfast: "We set sail at 0600."

That was fine as far as his nerves were concerned, but not his stomach. "0600 hours" quickly became "0700" and then "45 minutes more." The ship cast off at 10:30 a.m. when Will was down below in the chow line with the rest of his platoon. The enlisted men's mess was two levels below deck and in constant service. The chow line was a permanent fixture on board, as it snaked its way through the labyrinth of tiny corridors on that level. Will had intended to skip lunch in deference to his anxiety, but he stood in line for an hour before the ship set sail. When he entered the mess hall not to eat seemed an awful waste.

"Gotta admit, don't feel half bad," Will said to the shopworn corporal in front of him, as they neared the serving area. The corporal could have passed for a military version of Friar Tuck.

"Take it from me," the corporal replied, leaning his head toward Will to such an extent that he featured his horseshoe hairline, "I spent thirteen years at sea—got my time-in-grade in the Navy—before coming over to the Army. Listen, everyone wants to go it on an empty stomach. That's the worst thing. The thing to do is to fill your stomach up. The heavier the better, that's it."

Will studied the evident conviction with which the corporal made his point. His ample girth suggested he practiced what he preached. *All right, I might as well eat.*

"More. Give him more," the corporal directed the mess steward dishing out spaghetti and meatballs. "He's worried about his stomach, you know."

The burly steward's biceps flexed with each perfunctory attempt at shaking the pasta stuck to his serving spoon onto Will's tray. Finally, he nodded for Will to continue in line.

Will followed the corporal past as many as thirty tables on either side of him, each twelve feet long and fastened to the mess hall floor with black iron pipe and flange, before they found empty seats. "We're just sailing around the bay," said the corporal, pointing to the porthole at the end of the table. "Now eat up."

Will did not know the others at the table, but he noted they seemed content to be eating. He looked out through the occasional sea spray

slapping against the porthole to the shoreline rising and falling with the roll of the ship. *Doesn't seem too bad. Maybe I'll be glad later to have gotten something under my belt.*

"That's it, pack it away," said the corporal, waving his fork skyward with a meatball stuck on it. "You want to eat as much as you can, you know."

Will forced himself to eat even as he kept one eye on the porthole. Finally, someone called out, "We're headed out to sea." Will glanced to the porthole for a momentary view before the backs of soldiers' heads blocked it. *You can feel it already. The seas are getting rougher. Maybe it's not going to bother me. Maybe this is all in my head, after all.*

"Eat," the corporal said. "Pack it away."

Will raised his fork to his mouth. *Not sure I feel right, but gotta keep eating.*

The ship rolled to starboard and Will's tray slid away till he caught it with his arm at full extension. He drew it toward him, but now the spaghetti appeared like worms wiggling in the bowl. He looked about at the others, who calmly continued their meal. The corporal smiled. Will meekly returned his smile and re-focused on the bowl.

"I gotta get topside," he said. "Need some air."

"Good idea," the corporal said, looking after him. In a panic, Will rushed out the mess room door and fought his way against the long line waiting to enter. The heads of the tallest troopers brushed against the low ceilings, making the corridors seem longer and more oppressive. *I'm gonna be sick.* He rushed past a stairwell door before halting at the next corridor intersection and backtracking to it. This has gotta be it. I don't care where it comes out, so long as it's on deck.

After bolting up the two flights of stairs, Will burst forth amidships into the fresh sea air. He steadied himself against the door jamb as the ship rocked. When he stepped away from it, he shifted his weight back and forth with the ship's movement. He glanced from side to side before realizing they were moving fast upon the Golden Gate. Involuntarily, he put his hand to his mouth. *I can feel it coming on, goddammit.* When he started to work his way through the thinning crowd to the side rail, the corporal from the mess hall came upon him.

"Turn around, face into the wind," the corporal said, guiding Will with a hand on his shoulder to the very center of the foredeck. "Now take a deep breath. Go on. Take a deep breath. Face into the wind."

Will looked up in amazement they were already directly beneath the rust-colored span shimmering in the sun. *Gotta get to the side rail.*

"Take a deep breath of this wind," shouted the corporal, as a tremendous air current from the sea almost bowled them over.

Determined to give himself every chance, Will turned square to the bow and took a mighty gulp of the salty sea air before he instantly convulsed and was barely able to turn his head before letting loose what seemed like a whole sea itself from his stomach. The flow caught itself on the wind and blew straight away sternward, parting soldiers in its wake as far as Will could see until he fell to his knees and retched up the very last of the offensive worms that drove him from the mess table.

The soldiers nearby laughed and smiled at Will's plight, but Will was oblivious to them. Several worried they might be next, but accepted that inevitability as a small part of their collective curse. All made sure to stay clear of downwind from anyone turning green.

After two or three minutes, Will found the strength to pull up his hangdog head. The corporal was gone, and the bulk of Will's mess was gone with the wind. A couple of patches of messy spaghetti noodles was all that lay in front of him. He was grateful for that much. Nobody seemed to be paying much attention to him.

Will pushed off with his arms and set back on his heels. He fought for his senses and was aware of the relief in his stomach, but his dizziness and headache were unabated. His brain felt like a milk shake, agitated and in suspension. It took all his energy to get his eyes to focus and his foamy mind to act with some purpose.

The rail of the bridge was lined with officers overlooking the enlisted men on the main deck. Will figured it would be easier to bring the bridge into focus, because it was about the farthest point he could see that rose and fell with the ship, making it seem relatively still. Under normal circumstances, he might recognize the somber faces along the rail, but pressure within his head still surged with each roll of the ship.

"Bastards," he said aloud, surprising even himself. It was the first time since he entered the Army he had even thought of uttering an epithet against an officer. Of course, there had been times he felt frustrated or disappointed or antagonized, but generally he accepted the need for leadership and tried to take a broad view when he felt aggrieved. Even in his weakened state, Will sensed he may just have crossed some private Rubicon of his own.

What irked him was not so much how the officer corps led, but whether they were going to at all. Clearly, this was not going to be smooth sailing ahead, literally and figuratively, and any consideration, any gesture of mutual respect or concern was in order. But ever since setting foot on board, Will had perceived only contempt from the officers and the senior noncommissioned officers, who were billeted with the officers.

Will had heard stories about the officers' mess hall, where steak and turkey were served with red or white wine on linen with place-setting

service. At one point, he had thought it might be worth being roped into KP there, just to see for himself. One of the guys who told Will said the meal alone would be worth the fourteen-hour kitchen detail.

Bastards. He pronounced the word silently as he glared up at the bridge rail again, defying any who would challenge his stare. One by one he sought out those with whom he had direct contact in the squadron's howitzer battery.

He scanned each person along the rail from left to right, looking for some familiar face to confront, to no avail. By the time Will's glare reached the extreme right side, he was losing heart. Yet there stood a lone captain who seemed another sort entirely. His captain's bars glistened on his open collar, as the wind tousled the hair beneath the rim of his cap. His broad smile seemed a natural part of his countenance. Blond and blue-eyed, tall and trim with delicately chiseled facial features, he was perfectly cast for the part.

What a phony! Will bore down mercilessly on the unwitting captain, holding the stare with all the ferocity he could muster. Defying his own weakness as much as his victim's authority, he strained every faculty at his command. The captain started to look Will's way, and Will reached back even further to every indignity he had ever suffered for the fire to challenge this one last pretense at superiority and legitimacy.

Will caught the captain's glance and locked on it with all his fury, when at once the captain raised his right arm and casually waved and continued glancing about the teeming deck below. *He waved. The bastard waved. I can't be sure it was to me, but it doesn't make any difference. He paid his respect to somebody out here. With a simple wave, he acknowledged that we count.*

Will gazed upon the captain, now leaning on the rail with his elbows, until Will was prodded from the side. Will turned and looked. "Thank the Lord for small favors," he said to the corporal, who had returned with a pail and wet rags.

"Better wipe that up before they put you on detail cleaning the whole ship tonight when the rest of these landlubbers go belly up. Now that you spilled your guts, you'd be a good risk for something like that."

"Who is that?" asked Will, pointing to the bridge rail, as he took the bucket from the corporal. "Who is that captain on the far right?"

"Captain Mike? That's Captain Michaels. Runs the motor pool. Said to be fair and knows what he's about. Most like him. Why?"

"Just wondering," said Will. "Thanks for the pail. I appreciate it."

"That's OK, soldier," responded the shopworn corporal.

Someday I'm gonna speak to him, just for the hell of it. Someday I'll find an excuse to drop in on Captain Mike.

Will would not have so long to wait for this encounter.



After 1:00 p.m., Will's group rotated deep below into the hull. They reported to their respective cabins, in Will's case a large chamber made smaller by the presence of some eighty other men. These others comprised more than half of the artillery battery to which Will belonged.

A constant state of dusk ruled below, cast in surreal shadows. During daylight hours, illumination in the semi-lit chamber came in part from three portholes on the starboard side, but mostly from a ten-foot grid pattern of undersized, bare bulbs inside wire cages mounted to the ceiling.

Will's head surged with each roll of the ship. It was all he could do to make it past the ten-by-twenty open floor area obstructed by seated and reclined soldiers in order to reach the rows of hammocks stretched out four high.

"Sit in for me, Stone. Gotta hit the head," Jenkins said, accosting Will with a poker hand at the end of his lanky reach.

"You don't want me, man, not now," Will said.

Jenkins smiled weakly. "I was sick, too, man. Go ahead."

Will made it to his hammock. He knelt on the floor and checked to make sure the padlock was still on his duffel bag. All six bags under the bottom hammock seemed in order. Two had no locks, but that was how they started out. Will reached in and stretched out his hammock sideways. *It'll be a neat trick to get in this thing with this guy above me.*

It seemed to make sense to pick the lowest hammock when he staked his claim. It was nearest his duffel, and he would not have to climb over other people to get in. Of course, the consequence was that others climbed over him trying to get a footing to reach the upper hammocks. Stacked four high, they were slung less than two feet above one another. Depending on the weight and size of each occupant, the clearance between the person above and the one beneath could be as little as eight inches. In fact, this was the case with Will and the trooper above him.

Will squirmed into the sack, jostling the guy above him in the process. *Goddammit, I don't think this guy above me has washed his ass in his entire life. I must not smell so sweet right now, but this guy is ripe. Better try and forget it, just ignore it. But who is this guy? I never saw him before. Everybody here's from the battery but him. How come I get stuck with him above me? Just forget it. It'll pass.*

"Did you fart?" the guy above said.

Will ignored him.

"You heard me down there. Did you fart?"

"No, go back to sleep, mister," Will said.

"Well, you smell like shit then," the guy said.

Just what I need now, some asshole above me. Will gauged the man's size by the displacement of his hammock and figured he was bulky but not huge.

"You heard me say you smell like shit, didn't you?" the guy above said.

"It's in your pants," said Will to a smattering of snickers from surrounding hammocks. Will did not count on the audience. *This guy's got to react or lose face, but let the first guy walk on you and everybody'll try it.*

The man rolled over in his hammock and struck down at Will, who was expecting it and dodged the fist. Again, the man struck downwards, this time grazing Will's arm as his hammock swung toward the blow with the roll of the ship. Will lifted his knee into the underside of the hammock above with just enough force to let the guy in it know he was vulnerable.

"Fuck you," the guy above said.

Will ignored him, but waited vigilantly for another attack. Will feigned sleep, keeping both fists clenched and one eye cracked to any movement from above. He monitored the guy's breathing for close to forty-five minutes before accepting the guy was truly asleep.

During that time, Will craved the relief that only sleep could offer from the ocean's relentless pounding inside his head. But he dared not yield to its temptation. Instead, he forced his mind to go over once more Josh's shooting. *Did I do enough that night? Did I do too much that afternoon with Harry? How could I have done less? When the sheriff said I'd long been protected but no more, he meant by my old man's partners. Harry never would have allowed anything like this, but his partners—I don't know.*

Will studied the movements of the hammock above him. *That guy still smells like shit.* Then Will rolled on his side long enough to draw his knees up one at a time and unlace his combat boots. As he did, his mind once more returned to the day Josh was shot. He was not alone in that. Back home, over a late supper at that very moment, his adoptive parents were reflecting on that day, too.

About the Author



Brad Kennedy served in Vietnam as an artillery surveyor, machine gunner, track commander and forward observer with the U.S. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment from August 1966 through July 1967. Upon his return home, he played an active role in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. More recently, he has brought inter-generational perspective to the war in Iraq in his writings for *Intervention* magazine and other news outlets. He lives with his wife, Barbara, and their family in New Jersey, where he builds housing for people with disabilities. For further information, visit www.bradkennedy.net.

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