

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT

THE PLAIN OF JARS

I couldn't stop reading, an awesome work, if indeed the mark of a great work is to inspire, educate, move and—above all—keep the reader reading from beginning to end... a great writer to this reader! **Fred Branfman**, feature writer for *Huffington Post*, editor *Voices from the Plain of Jars*.

This irresistible story jumps off the page pulling the reader into the jungle to unravel a mystery that mirrors the complexities of this covert war. To read this book is to bare witness, and in the process be uplifted and proud of the human power to transmute boundless remorse into benevolence.

Harriet Beinfield, co-author, *Between Heaven and Earth*

A well-deserved indictment of the horrors inflicted on innocents in faraway countries by politicians, bureaucrats, and generals...Not just that, Mr. Lombardi has been able to present to us an extraordinary rendering of Laotian village life.

The writing is picturesque, cinematic, vivid, and sharp...a splendid achievement, a surprisingly well-researched, finely crafted novel.

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for maps and photos related to the story

The Plain of Jars

A Novel

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A Novel

N. Lombardi Jr.



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Dedicated to the people of Laos

PROLOGUE Laos 1969

"It takes twenty years or more of peace to make a man; it takes only twenty seconds of war to destroy him."

Baudouin I, King of Belgium, Address to joint session of U.S. Congress, 12 May 1959

Nothing that extraordinary really. Those things were known to happen. After all, there was a war going on.

Nevertheless, when he heard that firsthand account of what it was like to get blown out of the sky, it managed to unsettle him. It must have been just two or three days after he had shifted over to Eighth Tactical. He had walked into the Rec Room, where a serious card game was supposedly going on, though all the players had already put their cards face down on the table, absorbed in the narration of a highly animated second lieutenant in a leather bomber jacket who was standing over them.

"With death staring you in the face, you're suddenly stunned at your own mortality," the pilot was saying, "like, for the first time, you really grasp that it could all end here and now. And everything that's in your life, I mean everything, changes in a fucking flash of a moment...But the funny thing, and I know you're gonna say I'm full of shit, was...well, I could feel it, feel it coming, even before I got into the cockpit..."

The story ran on, but he had forgotten the rest of the details the young officer had so vigorously depicted. In fact, First Lieutenant Andrew Kozeny had intended to forget the whole damn thing, deeming it best not to even consider the possibility, to give no thought at all to such a disagreeable scenario, as this was the best way to rid himself of doubt and fear, emotions that tended to get in the way of what a pilot had to do.

Wanting to forget is one thing, but actually forgetting is another, for the mission briefing at 0400, only a few weeks later, reminded him of that episode in the Rec Room, and did indeed present the

prospect that something dicey might happen on the next scheduled sortie. To begin with, the reconnaissance photos were practically useless. It wasn't merely the cloud cover that perpetually veiled the mountains of northern Laos, since that was something all the pilots had long been resigned to, but the images were made even more hopeless by a frantic blur, caused by the erratic maneuvering of the RF-101 Pathfinder that had taken the snaps, and which was desperately evading a hell of a lot of unexpected flak at the time. The recon mission had to be aborted, and the location of the anti-aircraft artillery couldn't be adequately resolved solely from the recollections of the pilot. Therefore, the only logical recourse they had to protect the bombers, as outlined by the flight commander, was to use bait to make the enemy show themselves. The F-105 Wild Weasel, the plane that Kozeny was assigned to fly, had electronic sensors to detect the radar that the AA guns used for tracking hostile aircraft, and thus it was the typical lure to expose the enemy's defenses, although a heavily armed one: the bomb racks under the wings held twelve 750-lb. bombs, as well as a couple of 2.75-inch rockets, and two CBU-2A cluster bombs. Kozeny's part of this mission, along with his Electronics Warfare Officer and three other F-105 crews, was to get the bearing and range of the enemy radar, and knock out the gun emplacements so that the next six flights of bombers could come in without risk.

This wasn't the first time Kozeny had flown flak suppression in a Wild Weasel, although the missions he had flown over North Vietnam were tempered by better intelligence and more discernible targets; not such a blind run as this one. But that wasn't the only thing stirring his doubt.

Actually, the thing that was gnawing inside him was a facet of the mission that had little to do with his own tactical responsibilities: the bombing targets, if there were really any to speak of, were poorly defined.

The exercise was part of 'Operation Rain Dance' with the objective of retaking the Plain of Jars, this particular mission being a

retaliatory strike near Ban Ban. The 7/13 Air Force at Udon was busier than hell, especially the Tactical Fighter Squadrons with over three hundred sorties a day. The Intelligence and Operations briefing had told of a general concentration of troops in the target area, and the bombers would be flying a free-strike zone, loosely guided by the Airborne Command and Control plane circling high above them at 35,000 feet. At other times, release would be at the discretion of each individual Weapons Officer. In plain and simple terms, the idea was to pulverize the area, so that the Special Guerilla Units of General Vang Pao could come in and clear it on the ground.

The only features that Kozeny could clearly make out on the recon photos were the huts of a couple of small villages, and a structure he guessed to be a makeshift temple. But he knew that even if nothing of worth was visible, the bombers had to drop their munitions somewhere, and it bothered him that there was no predetermined fixed target for unused ordnance at the end of a sweep. There was no way that a plane would risk landing with armed weapons—they had to dump them. “What about civilians?” someone had asked. “No problem,” was the response, which could be interpreted to mean that they were the same as the enemy.

This aspect of the mission disturbed him, prodding him uncomfortably with a reminder of the letter he had just received from Cynthia, a letter that couldn’t have come at a worse moment. Then again, if only he had never decided upon this second tour, maybe he wouldn’t have lost her.

If only...

If only he knew what would be happening on the ground in the little village that lay in the middle of the target area, just as the planes would be nearing their specified coordinates. Old Man Souvanna would be at the market shopping around for high quality areca nuts, spending endless amounts of time inspecting them before committing to purchase. Young Keo, with a bamboo switch in his hand, would be taking the buffaloes to pasture alongside his father. Boon-mee would be heading home after fetching water, the

large earthen pot on her head threatening to topple her frail, diminutive body. And 19-year-old Jita would be skipping through the fields with thoughts of romance in her head, ecstatic over the hibiscus flower that her beau had just given her.

If only...

But it was too late—he was airborne, gazing at the gray, cloud-filled horizon ahead of him. He looked down below at a hazy patchwork of forested mountains and bare vertical cliffs that flaunted an unspoken menace. Kozeny then put his mind on the mission, alternately glancing out of the cockpit to key on his flight leader, ahead and to his left, and then at his Heads Up Display, the HUD, a hologram beamed into the air to his right reflecting his most salient meters and gauges. With this projected image, the pilot averted the need to look down at the actual dials—looking inside the cockpit could induce vertigo and cause a fatal collision.

Airspeed 650 knots, altitude 14,000 ft...looking out, sighting the leader, then glimpsing right at the HUD; leader, HUD, leader, HUD, all the while intuitively perceiving and adjusting the proper motions of his aircraft.

There was an orange haze, eerily beautiful, as the sun came up in a mist, shooting its rays to the heavens...

"Whoa! Oyster 2, got a beep!" called out his backseater, Lt. David Lewis, the Electronic Weapons Officer. "Triple A frequency, bearing zero-one-zero, range 7000!" His voice betrayed a buoyant excitement. Kozeny as well experienced a giddy rush of adrenaline, since the both of them had expected the typical North Vietnamese maneuver of turning on the artillery radar at the last minute, too late for the electronic countermeasures of the Weasels to be effective, and which would have left their asses wide open.

"Jamming pod formation," cackled the radio. The leader of Oyster Flight was ordering them to switch on their jamming pods, and to fly abreast with a staggered separation, to confuse the enemy radar into reading one huge blip, rather than four individual targets.

"Oyster-1, going in, engaging afterburners, on the nose twelve

miles, fifteen high...maintain position on Oyster-1..."

Although the flight leader shoulders a greater responsibility, it was actually harder to fly wing because one had to maintain position. To Andrew, this part of flying summoned in him an indescribable sense of balance and timing, and the high-tech choreography that ensued gave him an unequalled thrill.

At supersonic speed with the afterburner thrust, the hillsides melted into a greenish blur. Kozeny released the radar chaff, strips of aluminum that fluttered to the ground, to further confound the enemy radar. He flipped on the switches arming his ordnance, and checked his angle-of-attack indicator. "Reversing right and level, ready to pickle..."

"HOLY FUCK!" Dave screamed.

All around them, the colorful lines of tracer crisscrossed the sky, dotted by the puffs from exploding shells. The bursts of smoke were blue in color, telling them they were 57mm, and they were coming from somewhere other than their original target. The baiters had been baited, drawn in by one AA battery, while the other with its radar off silently waited for the kill.

"CHECK YOUR SIX! CHECK YOUR SIX!" Andrew yelled into the radio, alerting the others to watch their behind. He followed his lead down the chute, released the Shrike missile which would at least home in on the radar of the first AA unit, then banked left and pulled up, but not before his right wing was hit. "OYSTER 2 WE'RE HIT!"

Andrew rolled right now, banking and yawing, his pressurized suit nearly suffocating him as it inflated in response to the high-G maneuvers. If not for the suit, the acceleration would force blood out of his brain and into his extremities, causing him to black out....

He was losing altitude, getting too low. Then, machine guns, Kalashnikovs in automatic mode, unleashed a barrage of fire that penetrated the aircraft. Kozeny was scared, even more so when he realized that Dave's body had just been riddled apart. Covered with spatters of blood and flesh from his ex-backseater, Andrew

struggled to control the aircraft, the jet now screaming and whining as if in great pain, and violently hurtling itself at 1000 miles per hour, one and an half times the speed of sound, but despite all his efforts he could not bring her up. He dropped his entire payload to gain altitude but it was not enough to pull clear of the mountains ahead of him. His frantic hands manipulated the controls to ascend, while his mind raced through emergency procedures. The plane initially shot up into the sky, giving him some hope of regaining her, but then lurched and rocked, lost airspeed, and started to nose down.

For Lt. Andrew Kozeny, the journey leading to that flash of a moment was about to begin.

BOOK 1
DOROTHY'S SEARCH

Chapter I

Ohio 1989

"...Defense Department Policy for response on U.S. operations in Laos still applies and is quoted as follows: Quote. The preferable response to questions about air operations in Laos is 'no comment'."

Instructions from the Commander of the Pacific Air Forces sent to U.S. Air Force commanders in Thailand, February 1969

Dorothy Kozeny was merely going through the motions; trying to stick to the same routines she had followed each day for more years than she cared to remember. She had made her bed, replacing her paisley bedcover. She had washed the clothes, hung them to dry, ironed and folded them, all with an automaton-like indifference. But no matter how hard she tried to believe otherwise, today, what seemed a boringly ordinary autumn day, threatened to be different. Without any warning, her chores lost that familiar character of regularity she had been carefully cultivating over the years. She brewed herself coffee, fed the cat, and washed the dishes, not out of years of habit, but with a strained and willful tenacity, refusing to admit the possibility that things were indeed different than they were before this morning. Even watering her garden, her lovely crocuses and bougainvillea, was devoid of the usual pleasure.

It was hard to find a word for what some person who didn't even have the courage to leave a name had done to her, just as she started her day. Despicable maybe, contemptuous perhaps, cruel certainly, considering the painstaking effort she had made to build all those protective layers around her heart, a mother's heart, just to have them shattered, to be taunted twenty years later with the loss of her only child.

Whose ashes did you get?

Weary after a whole day of fighting off her distress, she plopped

herself down at the dining room table and cradled her head in her hands.

It was nearly the end of October, so it was already dark at five-thirty. Now that they had set the clocks back the days seemed to end prematurely. She sat in the gathering gloom, oblivious to the passing of time, the progress of which was nonetheless marked by the emphatic tick-tock of the grandfather clock on the opposite side of the room, its persistent stroke piercing the funereal silence.

The year was 1989. The twentieth anniversary of that horrible day had only just passed.

She was alone, and had been so ever since her husband Bill had died of a stroke seven years before. Was it only seven years ago, or did her husband die before that, the day the news came from the Air Force Casualty Office? To be given a lump of ashes and charred bone fragments, and to be told that this was all that remained of your son, your future hopes, was something that could make you resign from living. And so, understandably, William Kozeny began to shrivel up inside. For Dorothy, however, tending to her husband's grief, in some ways, had made it easier to deal with her own. Together, the both of them had gone through all the stages, from horrific shock to searing pain, to the endless chronic ache of sorrow. Until the rent in their souls could at least heal to a malformed scar. And now, to go through all that again, alone...*Whose ashes did you get?*

No longer able to contain her emotions, she sobbed aloud, her doleful moaning filling the darkness and echoing off the oak-paneled walls. It took a few minutes before she managed to restrain herself, sniffing her way back to self-control.

It had come that morning, in the mail, inside a plain white envelope with no return address, but with a faint postmark she made out to be Rockland, Maine. Was it a hoax, a malicious prank, or was there some substance behind it? On an A4 sheet of paper, in what appeared to be a demonic, handwritten scrawl, only the words: '*Whose ashes did you get?*'

The clanging of her baking timer startled her. Good, she thought.

Movement. Get up and move; movement will keep the brooding at bay. So, in an over-affected manner, she forced herself out of her chair and walked into the kitchen, which, in contrast to the darkened dining room, was blazingly lit by a circular tube of fluorescent light set in the ceiling. She opened the oven door to check on the rhubarb pie that she was baking for the bridge party. If she kept herself busy, maybe she could forget about this asinine letter. Inserting her hands into the oven, she noticed they were shaking...she would go to the Jack La Lane's Spa first, she told herself in her head, and go to Elizabeth's house directly from there...rhubarb pie, bridge party, Jack La Lane's....

Not paying attention to what she was doing, she burned her hand on the hot insides of the oven, causing her to drop the pie on the floor, the pie dish making an awful clatter as it rolled around, the filling splattered onto the tiles like blood from a wounded creature. She covered her face and burst into tears again.

Whose ashes did you get?

Feeling faint, Dorothy quickly sought a kitchen chair to sit down in. Her pulse started to race, her heart thumping heavily. It had been so long since she'd had a panic attack; she wondered if the Xanax in the medicine cabinet was still good. She jumped up to go into the bathroom, turned on the light, flung open the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet, and retrieved the orange plastic vial. Two tablets later, sitting on her bed and taking slow, deep breaths, she waited for their calming effect. Once her anxiety was under control, she stood up and challenged herself to open that drawer of her dresser, the one that had been safely closed for years, the one with the photo album and the framed pictures that had once hung on the wall and kept her company on the night table.

By the dull glow of an ornamental lamp with a shade made of clamshells, a souvenir from their trip to Bermuda, she went through the photographs one by one, trying to picture her son's face before her, evoking memories. There was the one with a little boy, a towel tied around his neck to serve as his Superman cape, on top of a chair,

ready to jump off. Even then, he was fascinated with flying, incessantly jumping off things until she and Bill had to put a stop to it when the stove came crashing down one morning while they were still snoozing in bed. She smiled wistfully at this recollection. In another photo, he wore a mixing bowl on his head, and using a ruler for a microphone, sang *Pennies from Heaven* to a Tony Bennett record. This snapshot broke her short-lived composure and elicited a further bout of weeping, but she managed to carry on to the next photograph, a little Andrew sitting amidst a pile of toys under the Christmas tree...there he was again, wearing a cake-icing mustache at his sixth birthday party... posing in a kid-sized blue suit for his Communion at eight years old...and in a red robe for his Confirmation four years later...

He was a good boy, who went to church every Sunday, without any pressure from her or Bill, who were only intermittent churchgoers. Only after Andrew had died did she go weekly to light a candle for him.

Flipping through the photo album, the pictures traced his life to young adulthood—at the wheel of his first car, a '58 Rambler; posing with his medal for the state cross-country championship; then, some time after, standing by the Piper Cub he flew for his flying lessons...

He was such a handsome boy: tawny blond hair, long-lashed, sky-blue eyes, and a charming smile; she could only find fault with the slightly pug nose. Probably got that from his grandfather—her father—she mused to herself.

She touched the photos imploringly as she gazed at them, as if they were privy to the knowledge concerning her son's fate, hoping to extract answers from an unlikely inspirational connection.

...Whose ashes did you get?

"Oh Dear God, why?" she cried out to an empty house. "Why, Lord, did you make me bring him into this world...then take him away so violently...without the dignity of a normal burial? WHY!" she screamed.

Her bitterness vented, she continued looking through the album,

her eyes brimming. In the last batch of pictures, Cynthia, Andrew's ex-steady, now appeared together with her son.

Outside of his parents, Andrew had two great loves in his youth. One was flying. He had worked his whole adolescence saving up money for his flying lessons. Both she and Bill were so proud of him when he finally got his license. Dorothy, now on an emotional seesaw, grinned widely, recalling the time Andy took his father up in the rented Piper. Poor Bill, who felt uncomfortable in a mere elevator, had been paralyzed with terror, but, as he confessed later, there was something wonderfully intimate in putting his life in his son's hands. The next autumn, Andrew was on cloud nine after he was accepted at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs—for him it was a dream come true. That was back in 1963, when the Vietnam War was only a faint rumbling in the distance.

Her son's other great love was Cynthia. Golden-haired and athletic, she had the poise and self-assurance of a beauty queen, though she was, paradoxically, more of an unaffected nature girl ...what was it that Bill called her? Earth Child, wasn't it? She was always dragging Andrew off hiking and fishing, and she seemed to be forever wearing those cutoff shorts. When Andrew attended the Air Force Academy, she followed him a year later, enrolling as a student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. For eight years, from high school sophomore, to his assignment in Southeast Asia, Cynthia was Andrew's devoted sweetheart. Perhaps what made their intimacy more intense was that they both lacked any siblings, each an only child.

Yet Dorothy knew all too well that, even in the most favorable of times, young love is tested by the changes that usher kids into adolescence. Goodness, on how many occasions did she and Bill split up? The 1960s were exceptionally volatile, a period when values were being questioned, old standards were being discarded, and new fads were being adopted with each and every Beatles album. In 1969, America's eminent triumph in landing men on the moon was tainted by the protests and demonstrations of her youth that

disclaimed her. To be patriotic was no longer fashionable, and war was seen as murderous, not glorious.

1969 was a bad year. In 1969, the Kozeny's lost their son. A son Dorothy had fed with her breasts, carried in her arms, and consoled when he was hurt.

Why, she found herself wondering, couldn't they have had other children? It would have made his loss so much easier to bear. She immediately felt guilty at that last thought, which led her to cry again, a soft, whimpering cadence of self-pity. She removed her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes before resuming her despondent journey down memory lane.

Cynthia. It had been so long ago.

Andrew's decision to go back to a second tour had angered Cynthia, and aggravated an ever-widening rift between the couple. It was unfortunate, for Dorothy had quite naturally assumed that they would soon get married. But Cynthia had joined the peace movement and became an active antiwar protestor, a transformation that was discordant with Andrew's military career. When he went back to the war a second time, she told him she didn't want to have anything to do with him. Or so Dorothy had heard, for neither one of them got the chance to explain to her just what the problem was. Regrettably, the breach in Cynthia's relationship with Andrew had also estranged her from the rest of the Kozenys, and contact between them soon ended.

Could it be her...after all these years...would she...no, not in such a grisly way...she would never do a thing like that. Still, she might have an idea; she was an investigative reporter now or something similar. Dorothy of course, had heard about the tragic highway accident in which both her parents had been killed. She had also heard through the grapevine that afterwards Cynthia had refused to sell the family house, and didn't even rent it out, preferring to use it herself for periodic retreats from her hectic life in LA or New York or wherever. Though Cynthia resided in Camden for only a few months of the year, lessening the likelihood that she

was in, Dorothy's urge to call her was irrepressible.

She went into the living room, flipping on the lights along the way, and sought out the telephone notebook that she kept in the drawer under where the telephone sat. Paging through it, she belatedly realized that the number wasn't in there; it's in the old notebook, the one in the shoebox in the closet.

She dived into the closet and dug her way through until she found the shoebox, then carried it to the living room to the end table with the telephone. She threw open the lid, recovered the faded green notebook, and with trembling fingers paged to S for Soronson.

With her fingers still quaking, she dialed the number. She put the receiver to her ear, then quickly pressed the button on the cradle to disconnect. She slowly put down the receiver and took a deep breath. She picked up the receiver again, then put it down again, but keeping her hand on it. Summoning her resolution, she picked up the receiver for the third time, dialed once more and braced herself.

The distant ring on the other end heightened her anticipation.

"Uh, hello?" came a voice from the past.

"Cynthia?" she blurted, suddenly petrified. What should she say? "Is that you? This is Dorothy, Dorothy Kozeny."

"Dot?"

Being called Dot, the affectionate name that Bill had always used, nearly broke her voice.

"Yes, Cindy, it's me."

"Well, hello, how are you?"

"I'm fine, just fine...it's just that it's been so long and I thought...well, really, I was fine, but now, I'm not so sure, I...I just thought...Well, I have to...I need to... talk to you..."

"Yes, of course, I'm..." There was a slight pause on the line. "I'm sorry that I've been out of touch. I didn't mean anything by it, it's just...you know..."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Dot?"

"Yes?"

"Is everything okay?"

"No!" she whined, and the floodgates damming her emotions opened.

Camden, Ohio had grown larger over the past twenty years, so by now it was a mini-city replete with office blocks and mega-malls, but there were a few persistent landmarks that still imbued a small town atmosphere. Rosie's C'mon Inn, where all the kids a generation ago used to hang out, attracted by its wide, discreetly shaded parking area, not to mention those famous Chili Burgers, was one such place.

After Dorothy had related to Cynthia the story about the puzzling anonymous message, a lengthy discussion had ensued on the telephone, including the exchange of apologies, and promises not to let such a long lull happen again. There followed a quick review of what had taken place in their lives since their last contact. When Cynthia told her that she hadn't married anyone yet, Dorothy had noted it with some significance. Their conversation finally culminated in a plan to meet face-to-face. Rosie's C'mon Inn was the first place that had popped into Dorothy's head, unconsciously associating it with the bygone courtship between Cynthia and her son.

Before leaving the house, Dorothy had studied herself in the mirror, wondering how Cynthia would perceive the changes in her. She debated whether her beige pants suit was appropriate or whether it was too formal and cold. Beyond the immediate issue of her attire, she pondered the years that had passed. Her streaky, silver-gray hair was now worn in a pageboy with bangs, and crow's feet had sprouted from the corners of her pale blue eyes. Her skin was peppered with orange age-spots, and a pair of faint lines on each side of her face demarcated her cheeks. Around her midsection, a girth had developed, but despite her sixty-four years of age, her body was still surprisingly athletic-looking (Jack La Lane's Fitness

Center had been a worthwhile endeavor, she concluded to herself).

When she arrived at the diner, it was fairly quiet, the only other customer being a rotund, bald-headed man sitting at the counter busy shoveling his eggs onto a piece of toast. Waiting in the corner booth, Dorothy nervously rummaged through the contents of her pocketbook: removing the old orphaned sheets of Kleenex, rearranging her vial of Tylenol, putting the lipstick back in her cosmetic case, taking out the money from her purse and sorting it ...and then she saw her, walking through the swing door. It had to be her, but yet it wasn't. Dressed in a denim shirt and a pair of tight jeans that advertised her shapely hips, her hair in a wild, honey-brown mane, she strode in with a brashness that Dorothy couldn't recall Cynthia ever having previously possessed. God, she looked older, but of course she was older, must be nearly forty by now. Her hair was darker, her body heavier, and the soft curves of her face had hardened into angular edges. Despite a slight puffiness around her eyes, she was still quite good-looking, and her beautiful smile was much the same as ever, one forming now as she recognized Dorothy immediately and approached.

Dorothy stood up to hug her and couldn't stop her eyes from watering. She had underestimated just how emotional it would be to see her. "Cynthia!"

"Oh Dot, I'm so sorry," she consoled, squeezing her affectionately.

The two of them ended their embrace and, linking their hands, stood back to take stock of each other.

"Dot, you look great!" Cynthia said, the sparkle in her eyes showing the sincerity behind the cliché. "You really do. You haven't aged a day!"

Dorothy forced an abashed smile. "Thank you. And you, you still look like the 'Earth Child'."

Cynthia simpered self-consciously. "No, I doubt it. Maybe more of a 'Globetrotting Mama' ...let's sit down for God's sake!" Slipping into the booth, she resumed with her consolations. "Dot, I'm sorry

about Bill. I wanted to come to the funeral, but I was in Chile at the time."

Dorothy released a pensive sigh. "Oh, that's all right. I understand. I try to convince myself it was for the best, you know, he was never the same after...well, you know...I think that's what really killed him."

"Well, none of us are the same, are we? I'm sorry about everything else too."

"No, please Cynthia, don't feel bad. What's past is past."

Dorothy wanted to steer the conversation off this melancholic track. She remembered that Cynthia had told her that she was a freelance journalist, writing for various publications ranging from *National Geographic* to *Ramparts*. "How is your work going, I mean, I hope I'm not keeping you..."

"Don't be silly. I'm glad we're finally getting together. We should have never lost contact." Cynthia raised her arm, signaling a waitress. "Are you hungry?" she asked Dorothy.

"No, I really don't want anything."

"Coffee?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"Two coffee's and one plate of quiche, please," she told the waitress. Then, to Dorothy, "I can imagine how upset you must be over that note you got. I don't know what to say, it's really bizarre. I've been digging up some background stuff since you called, and, strange as it seems, there might be something to it."

"Something to it?"

"Yes, well, I mean, it might be more than just a nasty joke. But who the hell would send a message like that in such a cryptic manner is beyond me."

At this point, she stopped her dialogue to dig into her buckskin pocketbook, coming out with a pack of cigarettes.

Cynthia smoked now?

She lit her cigarette with a Zippo, clicking it shut with an aggressive mannerism that seemed masculine, followed by franti-

cally waving the smoke away with her arm. This image of Cynthia conflicted with Dorothy's vision of the sweet, polite girl she had kept in her memories.

After exhaling a puff of smoke, Cynthia continued her explanation. "You know, a few years ago, they excavated the crash site of a C-130, that's a type of cargo plane..." She paused to take in another drag, "...at Pakse, a small town in Laos. It was carrying munitions and thirteen men."

"Where?"

"In Laos. It went down..."

"I'm sorry, but just where is 'Louse'?"

"It's the country next door to Vietnam," Cynthia answered with her eyebrows faintly raised, surprised that Dorothy didn't know. "The plane was on its way back to Thailand when it went down in a fireball. The remains of those on board ended up as thousands of burned bone shards, but they claimed they had positively identified which pieces belonged to all thirteen men. The wife of one of the men, Anne Hart, refused to accept her husband's remains without an independent expert to examine them. But the Navy was having none of her bullshit..."

Dorothy winced. She couldn't picture the other, younger Cynthia using such words.

"... and they tried to force her to accept what they were offering. She refused, and sued them, got a court order to allow a private forensic expert to make an examination, and guess what? —it wasn't her husband. The dog tag they gave her burned at a different time and temperature than the bone shards. In fact, the expert said that with the discredited methods they were using, it was tantamount to fraud to claim that any of the ashes and bone fragments could be identified as anyone. Well this just about opened up Pandora's Box. The relatives of the other C-130 crewmembers, as well as families of all the other pilots that were incinerated before that, began exhuming the remains of their loved ones and having them tested, and it was much the same. It blew up into a big scandal. It seems the

military just wanted to provide anything to shut people up, to prevent any widening of the MIA issue, especially since what they were doing in Laos was supposed to be a secret.”

“Are you saying that...?”

“Maybe, Dot, I don’t know,” Cindy said cautiously, “maybe...”

Dorothy suddenly felt as if she were in an elevator dropping twenty stories. She felt her stomach trying to come out of her mouth, and knowing she would never make it to the ladies room, instinctively grabbed the linen napkin that was set on the table and heaved up into it. Luckily she hadn’t yet eaten anything that morning and it was only mucous. Cynthia jumped over to her side of the booth and gave her a quick hug. “I’m sorry, Dot.”

“I’ll be okay,” she stated in a cracked voice.

Now that the suspicion had suddenly become a tangible possibility that Andrew had never come home in any form, not even in ashes, a whole plethora of scenarios crossed her mind, dominated by the flimsy hope that he could still be alive. However improbable, it was nevertheless a mother’s natural faith, which could only be quelled by seeing the body, even one that was, as much as it hurt to see it, seared to cinders.

An embarrassing moment as the waitress came over with the coffees and quiche. “There you go,” she smiled, and began to tactfully walk away.

“Can you take this please?” Cindy requested, handing the waitress the soiled napkin. The waitress made a face as she picked it up and deposited it on her serving tray, then curtly withdrew. Once she was out of earshot, Cynthia turned to Dorothy and said, “Listen, Dot, this is what we’re going to do. Step by step. First, if you want, I can help you get a court order to exhume, and arrange a forensic specialist to do the examination. If you want.”

“Yes.”

“If it’s not Andrew’s remains that you got, we’ll have to get his status changed from Killed In Action to Killed In Action Body Not Recovered. That’s not just semantics. Without a body, it makes Andy

automatically Missing In Action, according to a court ruling in 1979.”

Cindy hoped that by mentioning all this technical detail, Dorothy would be too preoccupied trying to concentrate, thus forestalling any slide back into an emotional muddle.

“All this has to be done in the POW section of the Defense Intelligence Agency, but rather than do that directly, we’ll try to get a special volunteer group to do that on our behalf. There is an organization called the ‘National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia’. They have some pull with the DIA, and that gives them a better position. It’s going to be tough, the whole MIA thing has become very politicized, and even the League may not help us. But if we succeed, the DIA will be forced to open a file on Andy and investigate what happened to him. You understand what I’ve said so far?”

“Some of it... I think.”

“Well, don’t worry about all the details for now. Just realize that there is a way to go about this. I’ll run it by you again when the time comes. Now don’t get any false hopes, Andy’s...well...let’s be realistic, none of this is any proof that he’s still alive.”

Dorothy sniffled acquiescently. “I know.”

“The other thing we have to do is to find out who sent you that message. Leave that to me. I’m a professional snoop. I already have a plan to bait this mysterious messenger. You have the letter?”

Dorothy retrieved it from her pocketbook and handed it over.

Cynthia pulled out the sheet of paper and examined it briefly with a pondering frown. “Don’t worry, Dot. I’ll be with you all the way through this.” She put the letter back in the envelope, which she put it in her bag, before pulling the plate of quiche closer to her.

Dorothy sat quietly for a few seconds before contemplating what she would say next. “Cynthia?”

She was now in the middle of devouring her quiche. “Yes?” she said after swallowing hastily.

“I don’t mean to pry, but I just have to ask. How come you never got married?”

"Ah." Cynthia put down her fork, swallowed again, this time a bit too hard, and thought awhile before she spoke. "Well, I have love affairs, but in the end I always seem to be disappointed. Nothing is quite like the first time. And then again, my work keeps me busy, always hopping around here and there."

"I'm sorry."

"About what? About me and Andy? Don't get mushy, Dot. It wouldn't have worked out between us. It was bound to end anyway."

Dorothy sat back in her chair and looked away pensively. Fitting, she thought, that there should be such doubt. Genuine or not, ashes aren't a person. He never came home, that was the point. And their lives had never continued, their plans had never culminated, and their past would never be sealed.

"What are you thinking about?" Cynthia asked, looking up from her plate.

"Nothing," Dorothy said with a waxen smile.

Cynthia Soronson hadn't been entirely open nor forthcoming in her encounter with Dorothy Kozeny. She hadn't mentioned anything about the correspondences she had had with Andrew while he was overseas—those letters of condemnation she had sent to him. She hadn't mentioned the harassment by the FBI and the IRS that had started soon after Andy had died: her arrest, the wiretapping, the financial audits...nor had she said anything about Mitch, her lover at Berkeley. She had her own ghosts of the past to grapple with. It was too soon, too soon to tell all. She was proud of herself though, feeling her performance in Dot's presence was laudable, her staged self-composure worthy of an Oscar. She had to be strong for Dot, for the both of them. But now, alone in her apartment, she could afford to release the reins that had been cramping her insides with emotion.

In her bedroom, she flung her buckskin pocketbook on the bed. One arm went up to cradle her bowed head; her elbow supported

with her other hand. She shifted her weight left and right, rocking her body back and forth, left and right, back and forth. "Shit!" she swore to herself. She had thought that that particular segment of her life was over with, filed away somewhere safe. Why the hell did she agree to meet at Rosie's of all places?

She stopped her rocking. Stifled sobs welled up in spurts. One, and then another, and then another. It felt good after such a long time, like vomiting after a prolonged night with a stomachache.

"I'm sorry, Andy," she cried. "Sorry for being such a bitch." Talking aloud like that made her feel stupid enough to stop weeping. She lay down on the bed, while her thoughts roamed back.

Their teenage romance began at Rosie's. She was sitting in a booth with Carol and Ann-Marie, two of her friends that, because of the way she attracted boys, probably thought it was to their benefit to hang out with her. But Cindy had little interest in any of the boys, except for Andy. He had walked in that day, and all three girls thought he was so cute, with his shy, sweet smile. Ann-Marie, just moments before, waving her arms to tell a story in her usual colorful way, had spilt her soda pop, creating a mess on the floor. When Andy walked by, he slipped on the wet spot and went down headfirst, flinging his milkshake in Cynthia's face and banging his head on their table in the process. What a riot, everyone screaming in laughter. But Cynthia got down to rescue him, taking the ice cubes from her soda pop and putting them in a linen napkin, which she pressed to the bump on his head. For a 14-year-old girl in a small Midwestern town, it's hard to imagine anything more romantic.

Two years later. Again, they were sitting in a booth at Rosie's. She was sixteen, a junior in high school.

"Hey, maybe we could fly there," he proposed.

She knew he was trying his best to lighten the pain of their discussion, a discussion that concerned their inevitable separation.

"I could rent a Cessna, and we'll see the country from a bird's-eye

view. How's that sound?"

Cindy responded merely with a pout.

"Then after my orientation we could fly up to Boulder, and you can check out the University there. Whaddaya say?" He playfully shook her shoulder in a futile attempt to lift her spirits.

"Andy, I still have a year to go," she complained in a nasally whine, emphasizing her resentment of the situation.

"I guess, that's why they say, 'this is when life begins'," he said wistfully. "The choices, decisions..."

She looked deep into his sea-blue eyes. "I love you, Andrew Kozeny. That's where my life begins... and ends."

40-year-old Cynthia, lying on her bed, nearly cringed at the recollection of such a hackneyed line, but it hadn't sounded so corny at the time. Her teenage mind had considered it poetic. In any case, what was really important was that it expressed her genuine feelings.

What happened after that? Oh, yes...with bittersweet timing, their song began to play on the jukebox, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

"I love you too, Cindy," he had said.

They were sitting silently, listening to the music.

"So we really shouldn't worry, not if our love is true," he had teasingly assured, mimicking the lyrics of the song. There was just a hint of faltering in his false bravado.

Their song soon finished.

On the night of Andy's high school prom, they had lost their virginity to each other. That only made the next year apart even worse. Now, reminiscing in her bed, she could almost taste that aching, that longing of first love.

When she finally made it to Boulder, life was great. He would fly in on a rented plane every weekend. She loved flying with him, how he did it so effortlessly, so naturally, like a bird in flight. They cycled the Rocky Mountains in the summer, and skied them in the winter. Those three years were the happiest of her life.

Later on he was assigned to McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. He had already asked her to marry him, but she wanted to go to graduate school first. Another two years, she told him, and she'd be ready to have lots of babies with him. She enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. After that, they saw each other less.

That was in 1967. In 1967, 50,000 demonstrators, including some celebrities, marched in protest outside the Pentagon. In November of that year, peace activists, led by Bertrand Russell, held a mock tribunal of International War Crimes against the US. In the same month, a state of the art navigational beacon was installed on Pu Pa Ti Mountain in Laos to allow all-weather, twenty-four-hour bombing of North Vietnam.

When he was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, she wasn't allowed to visit him. He was learning secret electronic warfare stuff, he had told her, and access to the base was limited. And when he underwent a three-month language-training course at a Defense Department Institute, to learn Thai and Lao, she asked him why, fearing the worst—a posting in Indochina. Somehow, things were deviating from their plans, and Cindy was finding it more and more difficult to justify his Air Force activities to the new set of friends she had made at Berkeley.

A year later, again at Rosie's C'mon Inn. They had both come home, she, for summer vacation, he, on a short furlough. She remembered the anger that had been grasping at her while she listened to him.

"Look," he said, "they told me I wouldn't be seeing much action this time around. And if I do it now, it's over with. If I don't, they might call me to do another tour again next year."

"Next year the war might be over."

"All the better. But maybe it'll get bigger. Let's be realistic, they own my ass for four years. And I'm getting a lot of pressure."

"Fuck them. Quit."

"I can't just quit. I have to do the four years. I don't think you know what it means to be in the Air Force."

"It's you who doesn't know what that means. It means you'll do as they say whether it's wrong or right. And the war is wrong, Andrew."

"But it's not like I'm killing anyone. I'm just hitting bridges..."

"And planes, with a pilot inside..." She was referring to the MIG he shot down over Haiphong, the one that had earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

"Well hell, he wouldn't have thought twice to have shot me down."

"That's just it, you stupid ass!" she cried. Men were so thick, she thought. "Do you know what you're fighting for? I bet he did."

"Look, he bailed out, I saw him."

"That's not the point. The war is wrong. You just enjoy playing the hero. Do you think that impresses me, do you, that medal you got, huh, do you?"

His voice became louder, betraying his frustration. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe I don't. But it's easier to take back what I say than to undo what I've done."

"Cindy, I..." he paused to search for words. He couldn't confess to her that flying a jet fighter gave him a rush better than sex. No, that would surely finish it between them. But she knew anyway, knew that her rival mistress took the form of an airplane. Changing tack, he asked, "You don't want me to be a pilot?"

"You don't need the Air Force to be a civilian pilot."

"You know what I mean, an airline pilot."

"It wouldn't matter to me if you were a crop duster, or a janitor for that matter. Better than a killer."

Andrew turned silent. This was his way of signaling the end of the discussion. It was annoying to her, the way he always let her have the last word. What made it more annoying was that it worked. His silence eventually made her give in. Despite everything—her new friends, her new politics, her new lover—she couldn't just flick a switch and stop loving Andrew Kozeny. It just wasn't that simple.

Ah, regrets! No matter how carefully one tries to tread through life, one just keeps stumbling right into them. Each time, you think you know better, until later, the cold judgment of hindsight condemns you as a fool.

But if only she hadn't been so harsh in her last letter, if only she had known she would never see him again. If only....

Chapter 2

Ohio 1989

"If we are given the right to use nuclear weapons, we can guarantee victory."

General Lemnitzer, of the National Security Council, 1961

It took six weeks to get the court order. During that time, Dorothy had tried to occupy herself with mundane chores, sometimes even making the effort of creating lists to find things to do. Her workouts at Jack La Lane and her garden were the only effective outlets of relief, for she couldn't bear to go out and socialize with her friends, to whom she hadn't mentioned anything of these recent events. She made excuses for missing their Saturday night bridge parties, and did her shopping early in the morning to lessen the risk of bumping into someone. What made things worse was that it was the holiday season, which not only slowed down the legal process for the exhumation request, but also placed Dorothy in a deep rut of melancholy, as she passed Christmas and New Year alone. Cynthia had gone to Sweden to spend the holidays with some journalist friends, but before she left she had managed to get hold of a forensic specialist, a lecturer at John Jay Criminal College in NY, whom she said would make the examination free of charge. He and his colleagues were to use a relatively new technique that looked at the DNA, provided that the bone fragments weren't too badly damaged by fire. In that case, Dorothy was to provide a sample of her own blood for comparison.

As it turned out, all this sophistication was unnecessary. The bone pieces weren't even human. Probably cattle bones, the specialist had said.

Dorothy emotionally collapsed at the findings. Her doctor subsequently decided on something stronger than her Xanax; he

prescribed Valium for her. A dull, cold pain inside her characterized the time that followed, and she moved about like a zombie, trapped in some horrible, grotesque dream. Sleep was her only solace.

What had happened to her son? How could the Air Force, the US government, make such a loathsome mistake? They couldn't have made such a mistake, no, not possible. But there is a big difference between a man and a cow. Or is there? How could you tell from little pieces of bone? Maybe there was a cow standing right where the plane crashed, and all their shattered remains got mixed up in the wreckage. How can the scientists tell the difference? They do chemical tests, don't they? Maybe they got the results mixed up from another sample? Yes, that's it! Or is it...?

She suddenly found herself with nothing to do but think, and more than enough time to do it in. It was only through Cynthia's assiduous support that she managed to carry out the next step, contacting the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in SE Asia.

They checked her son's name against a recently declassified MIA list. They told her that he wasn't on it, and therefore they couldn't provide any information, a file had to be opened with the Defense Intelligence Agency first, they said. She told them, with a weary patience that sapped her strength, that yes, she understood that, but she was asking for their help to change his status so that such a file could be opened. With renewed exasperation, she described the exhumation and the results of the forensic exam, and she also informed them that she had never received his dog tag. Neither was she given his Air Force nor his Geneva Convention identification cards (it was a clearheaded Cynthia who reminded her of this fact). They took down her particulars, including those of Andrew's posting at the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, 430th Tactical Fighter Squadron in Udon, Thailand, and said they would get back to her.

They indeed got back to her, surprisingly fast, in just a little over a week. But the response she received in the mail wasn't the one she had expected. It merely stated, in a cold and terse manner, that the

POW/MIA Office in the Defense Intelligence Agency had insisted, whether the body was deemed recovered or not, that the case of Lt. Kozeny was closed. There was overwhelming circumstantial evidence to keep his status classed under 'Presumed Findings Of Death', and therefore a change of status wasn't possible.

Cynthia, once Dorothy had told her of this disappointing reply over the phone, rushed over to Dorothy's house that very evening.

They sat drinking tea in the living room of the two story Four Square Colonial house, the one that Bill had bought just after he'd got his job as an insurance salesman, when Andrew was still an infant. In fact, it was in Bill's favorite armchair where Cynthia was now sitting. After reading the letter, she put her cup down, fumbled about in her buckskin handbag, and opened a new pack of cigarettes. They must be menthol, Dorothy noted, because the pack was bright green.

"There's definitely something not kosher here," Cynthia commented, before proceeding to light her cigarette with overstated deliberation. "We could go to court over this, but it'd be a long drawn out affair, and might attract nationwide publicity. In fact, we would need the pressure of publicity in order to win."

"No, please, no more litigation."

"I'm of the same opinion. We're not ready do battle with the DIA, especially since it looks like they're stonewalling the League, which is a bad sign."

"Why should they do that?"

"Sorry, Dot, I don't have all the answers."

Dorothy sighed dramatically. "Maybe not, but you've impressed me so far. Honestly, I don't know what I would have done without you, Cynthia. It's all so complicated. I probably would have given up already. But then I would have been haunted for the rest of my life. I'm really grateful for all the assistance you've given me. Thank you, Cynthia."

Cynthia then did something very strange—she turned and looked away from Dorothy, a sour look on her face, an expression

marked by a tinge of remorse.

The time had come. She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray with undue commotion, practically breaking it into shreds. "I haven't been totally open with you, Dot," she confessed. She returned her face to look once again at Dorothy. "I thought it best if you took things a little at a time."

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

"Do you know where Andy was shot down?"

"They just said Southeast Asia. I naturally thought it was Vietnam..."

"That's bullshit. Andy was shot over Laos."

"Laos? You mean the same country where the other plane burned up with all those men? What is this Laos? Was there a war there too?"

"Yes, a secret war. Do you know what Andy was doing when he was shot down?"

"They said it was a reconnaissance mission."

"More bullshit. He was dropping bombs on villages."

"In Laos?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

Cindy decided to bring up the real issue that was on her mind. "I never got all my letters back."

"What?" Dorothy exclaimed, befuddled at the turn this conversation was taking. "I gave you all the letters I had, all the ones they gave me when they handed over his things."

"Precisely. All the ones they gave you. But they weren't all of them. For example, I didn't get the last letter I wrote Andy. A letter that, believe me, I would have recognized if I had read it."

"Are you saying the Air Force lost some of Andrew's belongings?"

"Lost? No, I'm not saying that."

"Then, what are you saying? The Air Force kept your letters? Why on earth would they keep your letters?"

"Because we were discussing the bombing in Laos, and nobody was supposed to know. The pilots were told not to write about it or mention it to anyone."

"Why did Andrew tell you about that, and not us?"

Cindy felt a bit guilty over this issue. How could she explain it? "He was flying missions in Laos for only a month or so, and it was disturbing him, or maybe it was me who was disturbing him...you see, I knew about the bombing in Laos because of my involvement in the antiwar movement. Even though the war was secret, things leaked out, and well, I confronted Andy, especially in that last letter."

Dorothy was becoming overwhelmed at how the past didn't go away, but lay hidden, ready at any time to ambush the present. Not the past that she had remembered, a new past that had treacherously concealed itself all this time.

Both women sat in melancholy reflection.

"This is what I suggest," Cindy broke in, wishing to dispel the lugubrious silence. "We can make a 'Freedom of Information Act Request' to gain access to documents relating to Andy's case. Hey, now that I think about this, I know someone who knows someone inside the DIA. Nobody big, just a clerk. But even that would make things much easier. If we could get a look at these documents, we could examine this so-called 'overwhelming circumstantial evidence'."

"If that's what you think we should do." Dorothy felt drained, willing to accede to anything.

"Yes, it is. The both of us have been too complacent about this for far too long, me in particular."

"Please stop, Cindy. No more blaming yourself."

Cindy tactfully changed the subject. "Now, about that mysterious message. I put a notice last week in all the local newspapers in Rockland, and even in the Veterans of Foreign Wars newsletter of the Rockland chapter. Maybe that'll draw this character out and solicit a response. But we have to be cautious."

"I don't know how I should feel toward this, this," Dorothy stammered, "... I hate the person, but I'm indebted, aren't I? In a way, I guess, to whoever it is." Her face put on a severe frown. "But why stay silent all these years?"

"Any number of reasons. Out of fear, maybe. Or maybe they didn't know before. We'll have to wait and see. Now, I think that's enough for one day. Let's have a walk in the garden and take a look at your crocuses."

A few days after that, Dorothy received a phone call.

"Hello? Mrs. Kozeny?"

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Jack Shilby. I'm a consultant to Congressman Stephen Ames of Minnesota."

"Yes?"

"I'm calling you about that notice you placed in the Veterans of Foreign Wars newsletter, the one in Rockland, and I just wanted to introduce myself. Perhaps I can be of some assistance."

Dorothy's interest was piqued. "Assistance? How can you help me?"

The man on the other end coughed stiffly, signaling the beginning of his pitch. "Well, as a consultant on POW/MIA cases for the Congressman, and for others like yourself, I am in a unique position to investigate such matters. I can get my hands on documents you might not even know exist. I'm also in frequent contact with a group of ex-military people, who, out of frustration with the government's incompetence at solving the MIA problem, run their own intelligence gathering operation out of Thailand and Laos. I'm sure that together with them, we could find out what happened to your son, even recover his remains, or just maybe, if he's still alive, which, believe me, there have been known to be such cases, we could get him out."

"Get him out of where?"

"A POW camp. Many of our boys are still being held, didn't you know that?"

"Well, there was some talk of that, but I thought they were just rumors. They said there was no proof..."

"That's what they want you to think. The past few administrations have been more worried about diplomatic implications than they are about rescuing our brave soldiers who risked their lives for their country. In fact, Mrs. Kozeny, I have already begun making inquiries, and this may be true of your son. I haven't confirmed anything yet, but we're working on it."

Dorothy's excitement rose. "Are you trying to tell me my son is alive in a prison camp? Oh Lord, where, where for God's sake?"

"Actually, it's best not to talk about it over the phone," the man cautioned in a surreptitious tone, "so what I'll do is leave you my number and if you want, I could come down to discuss this with you."

Shilby then gave her his number, a toll-free number, and asked her to seriously consider what he had said and not to talk to anyone about it.

Dorothy hung up the receiver in a mood of elation. Finally! They were getting somewhere! And he said that Andrew could be alive in a POW camp, but the government was too embarrassed to admit such a grave mistake!

She called Cynthia immediately.

"Cynthia, that idea of yours, posting that advert, it really worked!"

"What are you saying?"

Dorothy told her about the phone call, and the possibility that Andrew was still alive.

"What was the name of that guy who called?"

Dorothy nudged her reading glasses up her nose and read from the slip of paper she had scribbled on. "Shilby. Jack Shilby."

"Oh no! It's all my fault. I should have thought about this more carefully. I should have put my phone number in the ad, that way I could have fielded the calls myself and screened them."

"What do you mean, screen them?"

"The man's a scam artist."

"How do you know that?"

"Believe me, I know."

Cynthia went on to explain that the POW/MIA issue had become a cult thing, just like UFO's and the Second Coming of Elvis. Worse still, it had become a source of income and a good business for some, and a political platform for others, including Ames and a couple of other Congressmen.

"How did he know of our advert?" Dorothy wanted to know.

"These vultures engage clipping services who scan all sorts of things, magazines, newspapers, wire services, and who look for information which might be relevant to their clients."

Cynthia expanded on the problem. There were those like Shilby, slick salesman who sold false hopes, and then there were others, wannabe Rambos who stage amateurish adventures into Laos, get into trouble, and embarrass the US. These cowboys, who often were nothing more than avid readers of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, even managed to hoodwink many prominently rich businessmen who subsequently doled out huge sums. Those mercenaries that were indeed genuine ex-military men, also had a poor track record of clownish attempts, and no such operation, despite being very expensive to fund, had ever come close to succeeding. In the most unscrupulous cases, they would return animal bones and claim that they had found the lost loved one they were paid to find.

Needless to say, this all but crushed poor Dorothy. Whenever someone called, she now referred him or her to Cynthia. All the calls were bogus. Letters came as well, and she handed them over to Cynthia without opening them, also all bogus. The whole thing was beginning to make her sick to her stomach.

As for the Freedom of Information Act request which they had made, it was granted quickly, perhaps due to Cynthia's contact who in turn had a contact at the DIA. Dorothy was given a choice of going down to Washington to pick them up, or paying an extra charge of having them hand delivered by courier—they wouldn't send them

through the mail. She chose the courier.

When the papers arrived, she and Cynthia went over them together. Portions were blacked out, or rather, 'redacted', the word Cynthia used, because they concerned things that were still considered classified. Other than that, they were mundane records describing the same story, except in more boring detail, about the reconnaissance mission near the border of South Vietnam.

A month had passed and Dorothy was now contemplating giving up. Their efforts were producing nothing more than a morbid disruption of her life. She wanted her old existence back, when Andrew was peacefully buried. It was in such a state of resignation that she answered the doorbell.

Cindy stood in the doorway. "There's something you should see," she gravely stated as she walked in.

It was a large manila envelope that had come in last week's mail, and which she had dutifully handed over to Cynthia just the other day.

"You better sit down first," Cynthia warned, handing her the papers that were inside.

Dorothy went for her reading glasses and put them on, then took a seat at the dining room table.

Dear Mrs. Kozeny

I was going through my son's papers the other day, and in his drawer I found several clippings of your advertisement from the newspapers and the VFW gazette, the one describing the terrible situation about your son's remains and the letter someone had sent you in the mail. I suspect it was my son who sent you that message.

Since he came home from the war, he had not been a whole human being. They took his soul from him, and perhaps he never came back to me at all. He has been in and out of jail, alcohol rehab, and even mental hospitals. He became a stranger to his wife and children, who eventually left, and even to me, his mother. I know the suffering you must feel as a mother, because I have also suffered. Perhaps you were

lucky to be spared what I have gone through.

It was only a month ago that my son put a gun in his mouth and took his life. That would be just about a week after you posted your advert. I think that maybe my son was trying to set things right in his own crude way before departing this earth.

Enclosed is his diary of sorts, sheets of paper on which he wrote his thoughts. Some of it is not easily understandable, disturbed you might say, but there are other parts that appear to make sense. I tried to read through it all, but it was much too painful for me. I have sent it to you in the hope you might learn about what happened to your son. Please don't think ill of me, or of my son, whatever you find out.

I am sorry I cannot offer you more than that, except my humble sympathies.

Yours Truly

Alberta Anatoly

“It was a good idea about me screening these correspondences,” Cynthia said, standing behind her. “I took the liberty of extracting only what is relevant to our situation. Some of the other stuff is a bit weird, sort of a bloody stream of consciousness. This guy was really fucked up, pardon my French.” Cynthia handed her more sheets of paper, which Dorothy, now thoroughly baffled, accepted.

Cynthia sympathetically put her hand on Dorothy's shoulder. “I'll be in the kitchen, putting on some tea.”

The Destruction of the Innocents

The Confessions of Stephen Anatoly

First of all, I would like to say that it wasn't my fault. Not mine, and not any of us other guys that you MOTHERFUCKERS SENT! We thought that what we were doing was right. You look to your elders, the ones who sent you, and you believe in them. And they fucking know that! That's why they take us when we're young and innocent – fresh meat – so they have a clean slate to brainwash. They set us up, and no way were we prepared for the reality that followed. Why??

Who were those villagers to me? What did they do to me? You slimy scheming filthy fucking politicians playing little fucking chess games with our lives...

Dorothy looked away from the papers and took in a deep breath. She wasn't quite prepared for such a depraved narrative. Reluctantly, she resumed her reading.

I wasn't just a Marine. I was in First Force Recon. First Force makes the Green Berets look like a bunch of soft wet plushy pussys. I was given extensive training in hand-to-hand combat, sniping, parachuting and demolition as well as advanced tracking and camouflage techniques. I was made familiar with Soviet and Chinese weapons. They sent me to Okinawa, like the other Marines, as a mechanic of all fucking things. Mechanic my ass, mechanic like the Charles Bronson movie. Then they sent me to Saigon, but not directly. First I got on a fishing boat that took me to Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines, then on a Navy boat to Bangkok. From there I had to take a domestic flight to Udon and then got on an Air America flight (that's CIA if you don't know) to Saigon. They did this because they had to have my records 'sheep-dipped'. I was assigned to Command & Control North, Da Nang, which was under the SOG, which was supposed to mean the Studies and Observation Group, but more like the Special Operations Group. The SOG was an independent organization that answered directly to a top-secret section of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These fuckers issued directives to be carried out by special teams whose members could come from all branches of the armed forces and the CIA, and could work 'over the fence', which was their fucking term for cross-border into Laos. I participated in the Phoenix program – to identify the VC infrastructure, and neutralize those considered key members. Neutralize means assassinate if you haven't guessed. This thing was so fucked up, I mean you had South Vietnamese generals and politicians branding people who owed them money, or who ran rival businesses, or whose wife they wanted, or anyone they had a personal grudge against, as Viet Cong, and we would

go out and kill them.

What did I know? I was ignorant then. Until that day I had to get some guy in the village who was supposedly hiding a 105-mm for Charley. I had to kill his family to make it look like the Viet Cong. Slit a ten-year-old girl's throat and disembowel both the guy and his wife, 'cause that's what the commies did if you were a traitor. I had to practice on dummies, but it wasn't the same as when you feel their hot wet guts pouring over your hand...

"Oh Dear Lord!" Dot exclaimed, horrified at Anatoly's graphic descriptions.

...After that I was no longer an innocent. Then they gave me an assignment about some Bennie, that means Benedict Arnold, a traitor, some fucking pilot, they wouldn't tell me his name, but I found out who it was, and it ain't no one's business, except maybe his parents. I was part of a hunter-killer squad with a CIA guy, a wacko named Botkin, and a group of tribesmen. So now I was supposed to kill other Americans. Was I a soldier, or did they turn me into a murderer? I fucking showed them.

Botkin got weird on me, and so I had to carry out that mission in my own way...

The rest of the writing rambled on about other escapades that enraged Anatoly, and told of his crack up when he held an SOG Colonel hostage with a knife at his throat, demanding to be discharged from the military.

Dorothy remained in her chair and stared into space, numbed. Her son was assassinated for being a traitor? Things were getting stranger and stranger, and she was aghast at the can of worms she was opening. She couldn't swallow this. Still, it troubled her; the reticence of the Air Force authorities, the crank calls and letters, and now this vile insinuation.

She rose from her chair as if in a trance.

"What does 'sheep-dipped' mean?" she asked, walking into the kitchen, where she found Cynthia drinking tea.

"Ah, good question. It means that the documentation of who he was, where he was, and what he did, should be made nonexistent. I asked my friend to ask his friend at the DIA to check out the records of Anatoly, and sure as the Pope is Catholic, Anatoly was listed as a mechanic in the motor pool at Okinawa and remained there until his discharge. According to the Military, he was never in Vietnam or Laos."

"And what about this other man, Botkin?"

"Another mystery. Robert Botkin, a real nutjob. Went around with a shaven head. He was famous for cutting off the ears of his enemies. Supposedly went missing in Laos in 1970 and presumed dead. Never found his body. At least that's what the records show."

"What do you think Anatoly means by," Dorothy positioned her reading glasses and read from the paper, "'Botkin got weird on me, and so I had to carry out that mission in my own way'?"

"I don't know, Dot. I have no idea what he was talking about. I'm sorry."

Dorothy sat down and had a quiet cup of tea. "I think I want to be alone now," she suddenly said.

"Sure, of course." Cynthia gathered up her coat, and gave Dot a peck on the cheek. "I'll call you later."

Dorothy began to take the Jack La Lane fitness spa more seriously now. She went every day. Thirty lengths of the pool, a half hour lifting weights—doing her legs as well as her arms—not to mention the twenty minutes each on the bicycle, stair-stepping machine, and treadmill. She ached for the first two days, but the stiffness soon subsided and she felt her body growing harder and firmer along with her resolve. At home, she ate rice, raw vegetables, beans, fish, and more rice. She learned Thai recipes and tried to cook them. As for health and first aid, she had no worries there. Dorothy had been a nurse for seven years before Andrew was born, and continued

later on for a few years until Bill got sick. She could look out for herself in that department, no problem. She would get the necessary shots and get a prescription for a malarial prophylactic.

Tired of being in the dark, and to ensure that no one would again take her as a fool, she went to the library in the afternoons and took out books on the MIA issue, Southeast Asian culture, the history of the war in Laos, and American foreign policy in Indochina. She decided to review her French as well, just in case she needed it.

She was preparing herself. Her goal was that she should be ready in three months. What had started as an embryonic stirring, rapidly developed into a decision so right, so obvious and clear, so inescapable.

She was going to Laos to find out the truth about what happened to her son.

At first Cynthia was incredulous. Once again, they were sitting in the Kozeny living room when Dorothy made her announcement.

"Are you serious?" Cindy gasped out, nearly spilling her coffee.

"I've never been more serious in my life."

"Hurray for you!" Cindy cheered. "It's been done before. By 1973 at least three wives of MIA pilots had gone to Laos in search of their husbands, and that was just after the war."

She then related the story of the undaunted Marian Shelton, who, being denied an entry permit, bribed a boatman to take her across the Mekong and stayed in Laos for nearly two months looking for her husband.

"There have been many more since. None of them were ever successful though. But that's no reason to be dismayed. I'll go with you."

"No," Dorothy refused. "It would be easier to keep a low profile if only one person went." For some reason, call it instinct, or a keen sense of judgment, Dorothy couldn't trust Cynthia to remain low-keyed on this assignment. Her job and her personality were just too extraverted for her to remain hushed about it all. "Since it's my decision," she tried to justify, "I should be the one to go."

Cynthia reluctantly agreed, and then informed Dot of yet another layer in the quagmire of military bureaucracy called the Joint Casualty Resolution Center. The DIA, she said, were only analysts who processed and managed information on behalf of the JCRC, whom they had to answer to. In other words, the JCRC were the real implementers of any action to be taken. Dorothy could go over the heads of the DIA and approach their boss, the JCRC, who had a branch office in Bangkok, under the name 'Stony Beach Unit'. They should be the first people she should contact before doing anything else. There was an outside chance, albeit unlikely, that they would assist her.

Cynthia went on to proffer more advice. There was an American embassy in Vientiane, the Lao capital, but it was staffed only at the chargé d'affaires level. There had been no ambassador since 1975. Cynthia cautioned that the Lao Government, after the communists took over, became an authoritarian regime, overzealous after their victory, and that there was trouble with the Hmong hill tribe and other rightists that had fought against them. Even at present, 1990, incidents still occur, now reported as banditry.

"Since 1986 there's been considerable moderation," she continued, "and I hear it's generally peaceful. But Laos is still a closed and secretive country. Tourist visas are possible to get, but not an easy process. They take a long time and allow only a limited stay. What I suggest is that you make contact with someone in Bangkok."

"Can I not get a visa here, before I go?"

"Well, if you want to do it the official way, it might take forever, or may even be denied. Believe me, I know how these things work. You need local help. Besides, you have to go to Bangkok anyway. As of yet, there are no commercial flights from here to Vientiane, the Laotian capital. Hell, I don't think they have an international airport that can land a big jet like a 747, or even a DC10."

"So I go to Thailand first?"

"Yes. When you get there, arrange a way for us to communicate,

either through fax or telephone. I'll also try to prepare some info on US plane crashes in Laos before you go. Don't worry, you'll make out okay."

Dorothy made an airline booking to Bangkok through a travel agent recommended by Cynthia. She was to travel on Northwest Airlines, stopping in Tokyo in five weeks time. In the meantime, she continued with her groundwork.

What she found the most difficult to deal with was learning about the history of events leading to the war that claimed her son. At first she was flabbergasted to discover that the US involvement in Southeast Asia actually began in Laos, nearly a decade before the Vietnam War, with very few Americans aware of what was going on. Worse still, the events that followed were incredibly confusing and irrational: a political soap opera, which, in large part, was fomented by bitter rivalries among the various branches of the US government. At times she actually became infuriated during the course of her research.

And of course she had to affirm everything through more conversations with Cynthia. There was mention of the Domino Theory, and the backing of competing political leaders by the Defense Department, the CIA and the State Department, each agency supporting their own candidate, which made Cynthia equate US foreign policy to a football pool. There were two conventions held in Geneva, where everyone agreed on things, but went on doing what they wanted anyway, namely fighting. But as confusing as the unfolding chronicle was, the end result was clear.

After nine years, seven billion dollars, three and a half million tons of bombs, a half million dead, and 750,000 homeless, the US had failed to achieve any of the objectives it had aimed for.

Politics, War, Football, or Dominoes, it was all the same to Dorothy.

Andrew had died for nothing.

Chapter 3

Laos 1969

"Why? Why? I don't even know where America is!"

Lao peasant woman who lost her family and home in the bombing of the Plain of Jars, 1969

The goddamn parachute would not do what he wanted it to do. The downdraft was too strong, blowing him across the valley, despite his desperate, feverish efforts to fight against it. He continued to struggle, knowing that he needed to land near the mountains. From the air he had seen the strobe lights at the top of the peaks, flashing signals that the Special Guerilla Units used to identify their positions so that they could be recognized by the bombers and not have the shit bombed out of them, and that's where he wanted to go, to land amongst the 'friendlies' in the hills. However, the wind was sending him in the opposite direction.

Wafting along on a hurried breeze, he found himself admiring the lush valley without consciously intending to. In a short while that beauty would be bombarded, and he himself needed to get out of the way of the 'party', but that was not to be.

He had seen his plane crash into the hillside, and now to the south he saw the last outburst from the ordnance delivered by the other 105s and heard the delayed, detached sounds of their blasts. The AA guns must be wiped out by now he figured, and the bombing squads would be cleared to follow. It would all begin in a matter of seconds. He hoped to God someone had seen his chute.

As the ground rushed up to meet him, he noticed that the area he was about to land in was considerably populated, adding to his already profound consternation. He looked down upon people tearing out of their huts and houses, while others were running from their fields, scrambling from all directions. It was obvious they

knew what was about to take place.

The wind let up, allowing him to drop more swiftly. After making some last-minute corrections to avoid a stand of trees, he came down with a thump in the midst of a raucous, fleeing mob. He struggled frantically with his chute, disentangling himself from the harness, but the villagers were too busy gathering up their children and coaxing the elderly to give him any notice. For lack of a better plan, he ran with them in the same direction.

It was only seconds later that the maddening chaos began. The first planes streaked in with piercing wails and dropped their CBUs—cluster bombs that opened a short distance above the ground and released hundreds of bomblets that fragmented like grenades. Andrew dove to the ground as the air filled with whizzing pieces of sharp metal, ruthlessly ripping through anything in their path. He heard shrieking, howling, and yelling, a continuous clamoring everywhere. But the most strident, dreadful sound was the screaming of the children.

Scores of people were cut down, riddled by the flying steel splinters. Some of the bomblets didn't explode right away and lay on the ground like brightly colored tennis balls, waiting to be touched. Andrew, quickly picking himself up, had to look carefully down at the ground as he resumed his running, while some of the fleeing were, unfortunately, not so attentive, and ended up as legless torsos catapulting into the air, driven by the upward force of shrapnel.

For a split second he could pick out the roar of more jets, then, an instant later, thunderous explosions shattered the air—they were going in now with the 750 pounders to destroy the village.

All hell broke loose. His head rang from the earsplitting concussions, until he completely lost all sense of hearing. Without the background of sound, everything before him appeared as absurd hallucinatory images, all moving in slow motion; human forms running helter-skelter, frenzied shadows stamping about, while all around them were bright orange flames and billowing black smoke. "Oh dear Jesus! Oh dear God!" he found himself crying as he ran,

while terror made his bladder empty uncontrollably.

Running with the crowd, he now saw the destination everyone was heading for—dugout holes in the forest at the edge of the village. In the midst of his flight, crossing the path in front of him was a little girl, seven or eight years old, who ran about haphazardly, screaming hysterically for her mother. Andrew quickly snatched her up, glancing desperately for the nearest hole. The pits were funnel-shaped and lead into man-made caverns carved out of the earth. He headed towards one, clutching the girl firmly like a frightened kid clinging to a rag doll, then broke in mid-stride as he saw the searing white flash of a phosphorous bomb streaking towards them. He could feel the heat of its flames as he swiftly reversed his direction, hearing a whoomph behind him as the incendiary bomb took the oxygen out of the air. The napalm let loose a sea of fire which encircled them, spreading like the fires of hell, cutting off the village flanks and enveloping a hapless few in a fatal, torrid inferno. Clothes caught on fire and burned on their bodies as Andrew slung the bewildered girl over his shoulder and ran deeper into the forest, where the napalm canisters would get caught in the trees and merely burn the canopy. Finding another hole, he crawled frenetically on his knees, wriggling himself and the girl inside with an urgency summoned by self-preservation. The hole was already full of people, six or seven of them, huddled in submissive fright at the walloping sounds of destruction above them.

Inside the underground shelter, a murky glow illuminated the face of a wailing woman, her eyes compressed shut, her mouth blubbering tearful prayers, the bloody body of a boy in her arms. The kid's leg had been blown off below the knee, the remaining stump hastily tied up with what must have been his shirt. The boy gave out little moans as she rocked him back and forth. The rest of them stared at Andrew in shocked silence, while the little girl hung onto him tenaciously, her nails piercing his skin, as she continued her ranting. A woman offered out her arms to take her and Andrew dutifully handed the child over, and to his relief, this mollified her

howling, which to him was even more terrifying than the booming of the bombs.

In the endless moments that followed, cowering in this dark, damp pit with these simple peasants, he felt a crushing shame clenching him, mortified that he was actually a part of what was happening to them. Though their faces showed no rancor, only fright, he couldn't bear to look at them. The woman continued to sob over her son, as Andrew cradled his head in his arms, smelling the stench of his own piss that had wet his pants.

The bombing was over in fifteen minutes, but it could as well have been an eternity. After waiting what seemed to be a prudent interval of unnatural calm, one of the old men crawled out, followed by the others. An elderly woman turned to Andrew and told him, "*Bai, bai!* Go!" Although he couldn't hear her voice, he understood enough to leave the hole.

Outside, the destruction of the village was total. The timber and bamboo houses were burnt and smoldering; the brick houses were empty shells, ghostly and roofless. The villagers looked at what were once their homes, and cried. Others called desperately for missing loved ones. Andrew stumbled around aimlessly, until, out of a morbid curiosity, he peeked in the hole that he had originally wanted to enter. The hole stank of cooked meat; the smoking bodies were piled on top of each other. They had, in all probability, had the air sucked out of them and died of asphyxiation before the heat of the napalm had baked their corpses.

He continued to walk around in a daze amidst the smoke of the devastation, which clung low to the ground like a fog of death. The air was filled with the acrid smells of charred flesh and vegetation, and a scene of surreal horror prevailed. Bomb craters, twenty feet wide and six feet deep, with dirt heaped up along the rims, pockmarked the scorched earth, still steaming from the heat of the blasts. Bodies were strewn here and there, reduced to barely recognizable pieces of debris.

Until that moment, the only dead body Andrew had ever seen

was the corpse of his grandfather, lying like a wax dummy in artificial repose in an ornate coffin.

He halted his groggy ambling, abruptly horrified. On the ground in front of him, a beautiful girl, the hibiscus flower pinned in her hair the same color as her blood, lay torn apart with her exposed entrails giving off little vapors of steam, and upon which a swarming black mass of flies had already gathered to feast. She was still alive, her eyes bulging with terror, and panting heavily in short, quick breaths: frantic, desperate breaths of the dying. Then, all at once, her rapid heaving ceased and her eyes glazed. Andrew, numb with shock at this sight, crouched down and, without knowing why, carefully removed the flower from her hair and held it in front of him. Gazing at it catatonically, he dropped to his haunches and sat on the ground, stupefied. He covered his face and began to sob.

He couldn't recall how long he had been sitting this way, with his hands covering his face, still holding the flower between his fingers, rocking himself and crying like a baby, wishing it wasn't happening, wishing it had never happened, that it was only a terrible dream that would go away, when he was prodded urgently from behind with a rifle butt. Looking up, he saw short thickset soldiers in camouflage khakis and green berets surrounding him.

"Tahaan Vang Pao! Vang Pao's army!" one of them shouted in the Lao language. To Andrew, his voice sounded like it came from very far away. Two of the others lifted him up by the armpits. *"Bai! Bai!"*

As Andrew got to his feet, he saw that the suffering wasn't yet over for the villagers. These soldiers were the Special Guerilla Units, the Hmong army formed by the CIA, who had come in to mop up, and as they rounded up the lowland Lao, there was a great deal of kicking and beating, women screaming and men yelling. Most of the confrontations revolved around the soldiers pillaging what little remained of the victim's personal possessions, with those protesting being severely dealt with. Some young girls were dragged off crying; for an intention that was all too obvious. All the rest were being herded together at gunpoint, being readied for a forced evacu-

ation. The madness he had experienced wasn't finished, only taking on a new form.

These armed men were the 'friendlies' and were there to rescue him, yet why did he feel like a traitor, as if he were abandoning the mass of people who were now being pushed and shoved into orderly groups? Were they the enemy?

There was no enemy here. Maybe five miles south, where those guns were. Or were the guns here merely to protect the village? If there had been any troops in the vicinity, they would have fled deep inside the forest long before the attack. Of course, the mission planners knew that, didn't they? This was just punishment. A lesson to be taught. Leave your homes now, or else. Abandon the only lives you ever knew, or suffer the consequences.

Cindy, thousands of miles away, had known more than he had, despite the fact that he was right in the middle of it, helping to make it happen.

His rescuers urged him on. "*Bai, Bai,*" said the same guy as before. Then he said, "too many danger," an attempt at English, to drive home the gravity of Andrew's predicament. It was almost a certainty that the enemy had seen him bailing out, and despite the bombing, this was still a contested area not yet securely held by either side. The CIA army had orders to get pilots out of the area as fast as possible. Meanwhile, Andrew instinctively grabbed for his portable radio-beeper, and noticed it was gone, dropped somewhere in the debris of the wrecked village. Without these Hmong soldiers, he would have been up shit's creek without a paddle.

They struck out in a northerly direction, while the villagers, in the company of the majority of the other soldiers, were being led south, presumably to a refugee camp at Sam Thong, or Long Chieng, in areas controlled by US-backed forces.

There were eight of them escorting him, leading him toward the mountains that he had originally wanted to get to when he was drifting with his parachute. Three of the eight were only boys, barely

ten or eleven years old. He had heard about the child soldiers in Vang Pao's army, and now he was seeing it with his own eyes. The ridiculously oversized uniforms hung loosely over their small bodies like flowing robes, practically hiding their hands and feet, while the butts of their M-1 Carbines, slung casually over their shoulders, nearly scraped the ground as they walked.

The guy who had first spoken to Andrew, and who seemed to know a bit of Lao and English, carried a PRC-25 radio in a pack on his back. He, along with the rest, set a fast pace, for the Hmong knew the jungle, how to avoid the enemy, and exactly which way was safe.

Over creeks and through the forest, they were making for the broad shelf that skirted the peaks, walking for nearly two hours. In the jungle, the trees were huge fluted columns, barren of branches, rising to a roof of foliage, a canopy that exploded into a vast layer of leaves that blocked the sun, only permitting a soft green light to filter through.

They were advancing straight up towards the peak, not deviating to follow the contours, but choosing the path of least distance rather than least resistance. As they got higher, they began climbing along flinty paths, stumbling over stones and tree roots, then picking themselves up again. Soon they were traversing an even trail, and the only sound in the silence of the mountain jungle was the crunching of their footsteps on the thick gravel.

Andrew was finding it harder and harder to keep up. He wasn't paying enough attention to where he was walking, causing the man behind to continually bump into him. Although he had recovered emotionally, his mind was still fixated on the horrors of the bombing he had just witnessed: the scenes of anguish in the hole with the villagers, and outside as they lamented their loss. He could still see the girl with the hibiscus flower in her hair and the pile of cooked bodies. He could still hear the children screaming.

He did that. He and his fellow pilots. But he had never considered himself, nor his fellow pilots, capable of unleashing such

terrible suffering; all the guys in the squadron were ordinary, good-natured, conscientious young men, not sadistic butchers who relished bloodshed. For all of them, waging battle involved controlling an incredibly sophisticated aircraft, pushing buttons and pulling levers to release ordnance on people that they didn't have to see, making war a cold and distant technical undertaking, divorced from the consequences of their actions, stripped of malevolence or hostility, with no subsequent pricks of guilt. But today, by a freakish twist of fate, he himself had experienced it from below, looked upon the victims, and witnessed the result.

When the troupe got to a flat clearing on top of one of the smaller hills, the soldier with the radio powered it on and began talking in Hmong language, jolting Andrew from his pensiveness. He was communicating with a 'Raven', a low altitude Forward Air Controller. There was typically a Hmong in the back seat of the FAC who could interpret the messages from the ground patrols to the American pilots flying these small planes. Sure enough, within minutes, a single engine Cessna buzzed overhead, appearing in a daringly low run just above the trees, and then came back again and dipped his wing in a sign of recognition. The Raven had pinpointed them, and ten minutes later the FAC was guiding in a chopper, an H-134, a Jolly Green Giant, which waddled in like a flying hippo, its rotor making loud whopping noises and blowing dry air in their faces. As the thing landed, the Hmong helped Andrew in, and the helicopter took off as abruptly as it had come down. By calling in the chopper, these diminutive mountain men had just risked their own lives to rescue him, for the North Vietnamese troops and the Pathet Lao now knew their location, and the Hmong would have to hightail it out of there to avoid a firefight. Somehow, still reeling from what happened down on the plain, Andrew could not manage to feel grateful.

The chopper pilot turned around to Andrew, who was squatting on the floor, as there were no seats in this rig. "MAN, YOU SURE ARE

LUCKY!" he shouted to him.

"WHERE'RE WE HEADING?" Andrew shouted back over the loud throbbing of the rotors. His hearing had returned almost to normal, except for a persistent ringing.

"Lima 32! Bouam Loung!"

"We're heading north, behind enemy lines!" Andrew hollered.

"That's right!" the pilot yelled back, craning his neck to half face Andrew. "Lima 32 is currently our northernmost position. It's where we conduct search and rescue operations, ever since we lost Na Khang. There it is, right there," he pointed.

They were coming into a five-thousand-foot high, bowl-like valley wedged among a ring of peaks, with small lakes near the edges. It was odd, the lakes, considering the rainy season hadn't yet gotten underway, so there had to be springs. On some of the passes between the peaks at the edge of the bowl, Andrew could make out heavily fortified positions, complete with sandbags and trenches. Near the camp was a landing strip with two more choppers and a Helio Courier airplane parked at one end.

The helicopter landed in a swirl of dust. A tall, lanky young man, presumably another American, and about the same age as Andrew, ran gawkily out to greet them, his left hand occupied in holding down the large cowboy hat on his head so that it wouldn't blow off. He was sporting a flowery Hawaiian shirt and pre-bleached hippy style dungarees, attire that seemed to flout the dire reality of the war that raged around them.

"Welcome to the 'Fortress'!" he hailed. "I'm Mr. Magoo." He tipped his hat in a pretentious imitation of a cowboy.

He was a red-haired fellow, with a reddish beard that matched his hair and a pink skin dotted faintly with freckles, his blue eyes sparkling with excitement, giving his face a bright and cheery demeanor. Consistent with this, his mannerisms reflected an overabundance of enthusiasm.

Mr. Magoo, what childishness! A spook, Andrew realized. A CIA paramilitary advisor; 'Sky Men', as they were known to the Hmong.

And the chopper belonged to Air America.

Andrew felt like giving him some stupid codename back, just to be sarcastic, but it was not in his nature. "Andy," he said, accepting the CIA man's handshake, and noticing his Seiko watch. In Laos, all Americans working in covert operations, particularly SKY advisors, wore expensive Seiko's. "you're CIA, right?"

"I'm with CAS," the American corrected. CAS stood for Controlled American Source, whatever that meant, and it was the cover name for the CIA in Laos. More infantile charades, thought Andrew, as if nobody knew who they were.

"Let's go!"

Following his host, he noted the collection of prefabricated metal Quonset huts, arranged around a towering antenna. What the hell was such a big antenna doing here? This place had to be more than a staging area for Aerial Re-Supply and Search and Rescue. It must be a communications center. A listening post?

In fact, Buoam Loung was an intercept facility, monitoring broadcasts from Hanoi and beaming them via a National Security Agency satellite hookup to Washington.

"How do you like our little Meos?" Mr. Magoo cajoled. Meo was a derogatory Chinese name for the Hmong, which their leader, Vang Pao, had repeatedly requested to the CIA that they not be addressed as.

Andrew gave no answer.

"Saved your ass pronto, before anyone knew you were gone. Not even half a day." Magoo seemed determined to elicit a word of praise from the rescued airman.

"Got here in about three hours," Andrew confirmed laconically as they stopped outside one of the huts.

"Hey, you hungry? I could boil up a few hot dogs. We got some time while the chopper refuels," he suggested, removing his hat and slouching his way into the hut.

"Yeah, sure," Andrew replied atonally. But food was the last thing on his mind. He as yet couldn't wrench his thoughts away from the

slaughter in the valley.

They sat inside the airless metal hut on a mat laid on the earthen floor, Mr. Magoo chomping on hot dogs and washing it down with beer, while Andrew listened with disinterest to his life story.

"My real name is Arthur Jinkweiler, and I was a smoke-jumper for the Forest Service when the CIA recruited me as a 'kicker' for Air America. You know what a 'kicker' is?"

"I've heard the term before."

"A kicker shoves cargo out of an airborne plane. You have to wear a harness so you don't fall out along with the load. After two years of that, they picked me to attend paramilitary training and counterinsurgency school on the 'Farm' in Virginia. Got reassigned here to Lima Site 32. And here I am."

Andrew didn't touch his hot dog. "You sound like you're happy to be here."

"Shit, yeah, what a fucking adventure. What some people always dream of."

Dream of? Who the hell dreams of death and destruction?

"Not like you flyboys," Jinkweiler continued, "who hot-rod in the air for an hour or so and then back to base. No offense," he apologized belatedly, awkwardly remembering that Andrew had just been shot out of the sky. "I know it can get hairy with those AA guns and SAMS. But down here on the ground you really get to see what the war is all about, ringside seats. And the Meos, they fucking worship us. They love Americans. You really see what it's all about," he repeated.

"And what then, is this war all about?"

Jinkweiler took that question as it was, rhetorical and confrontational, and responded with equal derision. "Well, if you don't know Andy, maybe you better head off to the library and take out a few books."

Ignoring that, Andrew answered his own question. "Strategically speaking, our goal is to drive out the North Vietnamese army and the Lao communists. But I've just come out of a village that was

bombed to smithereens and there was no sign of any enemy troops.”

“They hide and use the villagers as cover. And the villagers support them. No villagers, no cover, no support. Simple as that.”

Andrew wondered if Jinkweiler would have still taken that view, had he seen what he himself had just witnessed. Perhaps he would have, perhaps he would have still insisted on the legitimacy of such cold, hard, military reasoning. Perhaps it really was different on the ground, easier to lose one’s humanity.

“What’s up with you anyway? Found a Lao girlfriend while you were down there?” he quipped, pointing to the hibiscus flower in the breast pocket of Andrew’s flight suit.

Andrew felt like telling him to fuck off, but at that moment their attention was diverted by the sound of an aircraft approaching.

“Hey, just in time for the show.” Mr. Magoo jumped up and exited the Quonset, striding briskly towards the C-47 that had just rolled in on the dirt strip. Andrew had emerged along with him, but chose to remain close to the hut. The plane taxied a short way and came to a halt, after which the cabin door swung open and the pilot, also dressed in ‘civvies’, jumped sprightly down on the ground. Magoo greeted the pilot with an overindulging eagerness as a group of Hmong set about busily loading pallets of cargo through the plane’s rear end, the engines still idling.

Fifteen minutes later, as the plane was taking off, Magoo came back with a pair of binoculars hanging from his neck.

“See that ridge out there?” he indicated, pointing to a long massif of rounded, lavender peaks that formed the skyline. “That’s Pu San. We’ve got four firebases there with 105-mm cannons. Gonna make an air drop of ammo.”

Magoo stood with the binoculars fixed into his face, apparently delighting in this activity. It seemed to be just a game to him. A short time passed as they stood in the sun. When the plane reached the ridge, it dropped parcels attached to parachutes that opened out like flowers.

“Right on target,” Magoo said, looking through the binoculars, a

big grin stretching across his face.

The helicopter pilot called, signaling it was time to go. Much to his disappointment, however, Andrew was informed that he would be dropped off at Long Chieng, where he would catch an Air America flight back to Udon.

Long Chieng. Shit! The last thing he needed right now was to be around more CIA cowboys.

Nestled in the clouds, nearly a mile high, smack dab in the middle of the Laotian jungle, was Long Chieng. Surrounded by formidable mountains, the settlement itself was dotted with one-story buildings and indistinguishable shacks. The most prominent feature was a runway, almost a mile long, forming a central artery to which everything else was built around. It terminated abruptly at the foot of an immense wall of limestone. A serrated ridge to the east formed a natural fortification.

Long Chieng was the forward staging area for the CIA's 'secret war' and it bustled with military activity. The CIA section of town, a jumbled collection of cabins and sheds, was marked by a forest of aerials and antennae. The town's population, in 1969 estimated to be over 40,000, was nearly all comprised of refugees. They lived in shacks hastily fabricated from flattened fuel drums and burlap sacks that once held USAID supplied rice. All of the occupants bore the faces of war, and among them were amputees hobbling about on the tree branches they used for crutches. Others were housed in tin barracks, the insides of which were filled with a double row of beds placed head to head down the center, leaving a narrow aisle down each side. The refugees strung the little baggage they had over their beds with the mosquito netting. They had to cook where they slept, so everything was darkened with charcoal smoke. There were no toilets.

These were the things that fate had Andrew see as he walked around waiting for his plane ride back to his base in Thailand. He saw war. He didn't see glory, or honor, only depravation. Images so

graphic they seemed to belie reality, not the least of which were the scores of small children with vacant eyes caked with pus, too weak to utter anything other than muffled moans. A mother, whose teats hung like empty leather sacks, could not pacify her infant daughter, a wraithlike creature posing as a symbol of starvation. An ambiance of apocalyptic gloom, miserable and debased, bore down on all the hapless wretches who had been brought here.

He wondered when those people in the village that had just been bombed would arrive to join this multitude of human suffering. The boy that had gotten his leg blown off, if he was fortunate enough, would probably die before then.

All of this was a bit too much for Andrew to take, and it only served to hasten the psychological and emotional transformation that was already taking place. At 1800 hrs, he finally climbed aboard his Air America flight and left Long Chieng. He reached Udon Thani Royal Thai Air Force Base in the early evening. Fifteen hours had elapsed since he had taken off from there that dawn.

Fifteen hours that had changed his life forever.