

Indianapolis – 2012

Davey

This time there were lights.

It was just a blink, but he was sure there were more of them. His mind was racing, alive, trying to catch up with everything happening in front of him. The lights were spread in a small array just across the river, penetrating the dank night air. He could feel them on his skin.

This time will be different. Things were unfolding in a way that hadn't happen before. The warning last time was just a couple of sounds, and they'd been muffled by the slurping waters. They came too late to do any good. But this time his senses were alive and engaged. Another, somber thought tried to creep into his head – a bleak feeling that nothing had really changed -- but he shoved it aside.

Jimmy was lying inches away just like before – eyes shut, maybe asleep. That hadn't changed. He'd been reading a love letter from home just seconds earlier. But then he thought maybe Jimmy wasn't really there. He'd been doing that same thing the time before and the time before that, but maybe he wasn't really there this time. Maybe Jimmy wouldn't have to know what happened all those other times, because everything was coming together differently.

His rifle had been over by the trees out of reach, but that was last time. Now, it was right here, under the sofa cushion, and he had his hands on it. It had an icy, comforting feel to it even in the night air. The squad of enemy troops was just a few feet away, and this time he was ready for them. He had the gun out from under the cushion and propped up in position, aimed against the brightest of the lights. The trigger was moving back slowly . . . very slowly . . .

The pistol hit the floor, bouncing on its handle, as the muzzle spun around in the direction of the couch. Then it lay there quietly – maybe pouting over the fact that it hadn't been allowed to fire. Davey

struggled to get his heart rate under control. The blanket on Robin's couch was twisted around him, and he was starting to shiver. The remains of the dream were still tangled up in his mind, and they gave way only slowly as he tried to clear his head. His hand was still shaking. Moments earlier, the weapon had been pointed at the tiny power-lights on the toaster oven, coffee maker, and other appliances in Robin's kitchenette. Those devices were still shining through the darkness – warning lights, as of a few minutes ago, of an advancing Viet Cong patrol.

It had happened again. That thought terrified him. By day, his memories and emotions were bottled up, as he avoided any deep thoughts about his life. But at night his defenses weakened. And when he was asleep, they broke down entirely. He prayed and pleaded after each such dream that it would be the last, but he'd concluded long ago that no one was listening.

Each time the scene was slightly different – just enough to give him a moment of hope until the nightmarish finale. Sometimes it was the light, or maybe the noise, or maybe something else. Some nights the rifle was out of reach; other times it was close at hand, allowing him to rise to a heroic defense. All those versions probably existed somewhere in a parallel universe. But when the reality of this world inevitably broke through, nothing had changed. His subconscious mind might wind its way through as many wormholes as it could, trying every possible outcome, but in the end things were what they were and what they would always be. Their position that night had been overrun and they'd been unable to fight back. The med-evac teams had flown him out of there and patched up his wounds. But they missed the biggest wounds buried inside him. Those wounds were still there. And Jimmy was still dead.

It had been a mistake to try to see Robin at work. It was a Saturday night, and she was busy behind the bar at the Hyatt Regency, scooping ice cubes into the glasses and tossing off shots from the bottles in the well. The bar was a little short-handed, but that fact hadn't registered when he walked in.

There was an empty stool near her work station. She gave him a surprised look, and in the next breath told him she was busy and couldn't talk. But he needed to talk to someone. If it wasn't her, he didn't know who it would be.

The pressure had built up in him unbearably on the anniversary of that day in Vietnam. It was the same every year: he had to talk, but no one wanted to listen. In other years, when she wasn't busy pouring drinks, Robin would at least hear him out while he got things off his chest. But even then there was a hint of impatience in her eyes. *It's ancient history, Davey. It's time to get over it.* He could see people's eyes glaze over when he mentioned the war. There were many – even those in their fifties – who barely knew what he was talking about. A woman he once met wanted to know if the Vietnam War came before or after World War II. But even people who had been adults while the fighting was going on had put it out of their mind. They didn't remember, and they didn't want to remember. That didn't surprise him. No one cared about the plight of the veterans when they came home after the war, so why should they give a shit now?

Last night was worse – it had been exactly forty-five years since the attack. A round number like that unleashed a scourge of memories. He had to try to put it to rest – if only for a few moments. He thought of Robin, because he couldn't think of anyone else he could talk to.

"If you were going to come into the bar where I was working, couldn't you at least have behaved yourself?" Robin shoved at him, trying to get him in the passenger door as they left the hotel.

He tried to tell her he was more sick than drunk, but there was no convincing her.

"Jesus, Davey, try and act your age! You're going to be seventy in a few weeks.

He didn't need to be reminded of that.

"One more scene like that, and I'll probably lose my job. As it is, I might anyway."

Robin was fuming when she demanded that he get into her car after he shift ended. She told him she was taking him to her apartment for the night, because he was too drunk to drive.

“Couldn’t you have just sat at the bar and watched the Pacers game like everyone else?”

He remembered saying something about not liking to watch sports, but then she jumped at him.

“Davey, did you have to bring the damn gun?”

“I have a permit . . . “

“That’s not the point!” she screamed. “How many times have we had this argument? I don’t care what your legal rights are – you’re a fanatic! And if you start quoting the Second Amendment at me, I’m going to stop the car right here and throw you into the street. “

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Well, someone thought you did. You were drunker than you think, so you’re not a very reliable witness, are you? You got into an argument with the guy sitting next to you – I know he was talking about the war and got you all pissed off – but don’t say you didn’t get into an argument with that guy, because I saw you. He got agitated. Then you opened your coat, and it looked like you were reaching for your holster. He started to yell – I saw the whole thing.”

“Robin, I wasn’t going to pull the gun on . . . “

“What difference does it make what you thought you were going to do? Another guy saw you and dialed 911 on his cell phone – oh, you didn’t know that, did you? Well, he did, and the next thing I know the cops are there in the bar. And then the management – my boss – comes over and wants to know what’s going on. You tried to charm the cops by telling them that you used to be on the police force. But the more you babbled on about it, the angrier they got. Then you capped off your little performance by slurring out a speech, saying that you were a friend of mine and that you just came in there to see me.”

He looked over and saw she was sobbing. “I’m so sorry.”

She sniffed a couple of times and kept driving.

A headache had erupted between his ears, and it trailed down in spasms from the base of his skull to his lower back. Any quick movement was painful. He had pain-killers – in fact, it was probably the combination of the pain pills and the scotch the night before that sent him off the rails. But the bottle with the pills was back in his own apartment, along with the daily heart medication that he had been taking ever since his coronary a couple of years earlier.

Robin's apartment was starting to get brighter, and the clock on the coffee table said it was almost 7:00 a.m. He needed to find his clothes and then circle back to his own apartment before heading off to work. But he didn't know where anything was. He didn't even know where to find Robin, since the apartment seemed to be empty.

The mental energy to get up wasn't there. He couldn't find any reason to move – or to do anything at all. He sifted through his thoughts, trying to find one thing – anything – that he might be able to look forward to, but he came up blank. The feeling had started before he left the police force, but it was stronger now. There was a sense of utter emptiness that had carved out a huge hole inside him, and it was getting harder and harder to fill. He didn't know if he could hold things off much longer. The beast of nothingness was prowling around inside him.

He found his car keys in a small dish on the coffee table. Next to them was a note from Robin.

"I'm spending the night at my boyfriend's apartment. Try not to fuck things up any worse."

He pulled into the parking lot and found his space. The God's Children Foundation didn't have many cars there on a Sunday morning. But it shared the parking lot with The Church of the Kindly Shepherd, and within the hour it would be filled up with Sunday church-goers. The sign on his parking space in front of the Foundation read: "David Fallon, Security Director." That lofty title might have

impressed someone, but it didn't impress him – not considering the routine crap work he did from day to day.

As he slapped his security card against the electronic pad at the main door, he saw John Blaiseck, the Director of the Foundation, standing on the second-floor balcony outside his office, a cigarette hanging from his lips. He watched as Blaiseck let out a quick puff before tossing the butt down and grinding it out with his foot. He'd been forced outdoors by the anti-smoking ordinance in Indianapolis, and he wasn't happy about it. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties, but he'd probably been acting in that imperious way since he was in his twenties. He had what seemed to be a Russian accent, but he didn't really talk all that much. Mostly he just glared, which was even more unnerving because of his mismatched eyes. He'd concluded that Blaiseck was a bit of an asshole – but so what? He wasn't the first one he'd worked for.

This was nothing like the work he had done with the police force. There, he did real detective work – not the kind of button-pushing he did now. He missed his days as a cop. He could sink his teeth into a case and blot out everything else. It was probably the only thing in life he ever looked forward to doing. But when he was forced into early retirement, someone in the department arranged for him to get this job. So he was in no position to complain about it. His first stop – like every morning – was a cup of coffee to get him going. From then on, it was just a matter of getting through the day without thinking too much. He had surveillance logs and monitors to check, as he followed the path of the cameras around the Church and the Foundation offices. But as long as he could get everything from point A to point B to point C without stirring up anything unexpected, that would be good enough. Sunday mornings were a little different because of the big gathering next door in the Church, but after a while even that fit into a pattern.

He wasn't sure what the relationship was between the Foundation and the Church, but he thought it must be pretty close, since he spent most of his time in one building while keeping tabs on

the other one. His paycheck came from the Foundation, but he still wasn't sure where one organization ended and the other one began. The Church of the Kindly Shepherd appeared to be the money-maker. The Reverend Allen Wilder was a media star in certain circles, and his sermons were broadcast throughout a network of churches. There were plenty of places on the Web where you could buy his podcasts and copies of his books. The God's Family Foundation was a little harder to pin down. According to the literature, it was doing some important work on behalf of orphaned children worldwide. Blaiseck ran the day-to-day operations of the Foundation, but he stayed out of the limelight. Wilder was the face of things, serving as chairman of the Board and an occasional spokesman. It was Wilder's media savvy that probably brought in most of the contributions. He'd been featured in an interview on Fox News a week earlier, and the phones started ringing off the hook. Wilder and Blaiseck between them had convinced several national figures, including at least five Congressmen, to serve on their International Orphanage advisory committee.

There was never anyone in the Foundation offices who looked like an orphan. Mostly, it was just secretaries and administrative staff who did the paperwork. On Sunday mornings, there was sometimes an odd collection of people hanging around. He knew that Curly and Slim were already there, which seemed a little early for that pair. He hadn't gone three steps past the coffee machine before he ran into Slim. And if Slim was there, Curly was certain to be nearby. Sure enough, he saw him further down the hallway outside the door to the executive offices, probably waiting for Blaiseck to get back to his desk after his smoke break. He gave a brief hello to both of them as he walked past, and he got a couple of nods in return. Maybe he was just imagining it, but they seemed to be a little more surly than usual.

Curly and Slim weren't their real names. Someone in the secretarial staff had come up with those two nicknames in an inspired moment. It was a bit of a cliché, but the names stuck. By the time he'd been introduced to Edgar – the short, heavy one with the barrel chest – and Jerome – the one with the thin face and shaved head – the nicknames were already lodged in his head. Like a lot of cops, he

assigned names to people to fit their stereotype. It was a bad habit, because it could cloud your judgment. But in this case the names seemed to fit. Curly and Slim looked like they belonged somewhere in a line-up.

He activated his computer along with the bank of monitors and then began the ritual of looking at the active footage. There were security cameras in both of the buildings and around the perimeter, but he didn't see anything unusual on any of them. A few people were walking through the hallways of the Foundation office at the moment, but the meeting areas were empty. There wasn't much going on in the Church either, but it would be bursting with activity as they got closer to the Sunday services.

He ran through the log for the previous day and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. There was a video image of Allen Wilder in one of the side chapels from late in the afternoon. It looked at first like he was speaking to another person, but then it appeared that he was in the room by himself, probably practicing his sermon for the next morning. Wilder's style was way overdone for his taste. But what did he know? He didn't care about sermons one way or another – as long as they weren't directed at him. The Reverend's wife, Susan, showed up briefly on the screen, as she walked around the sanctuary, fluffing up the flowers, making sure nothing was amiss. The janitors were following their usual schedule, moving from room to room in predictable fashion. The last screen had a feed from later in the evening. He saw the back of a teenage girl, hurrying down the hall, pushing against the crash-bar doors, and running out of the building. He backed up the image until he reached the point a few moments earlier where she had left the Reverend's office and began running down the hallway. It was Allen and Susan Wilder's daughter, Alexi.

There was a light knock on the door. He turned and saw Reverend Wilder and his wife, Susan, standing in his office doorway. Allen Wilder didn't wait to be invited but instead strode through the half-

open door, moving towards the desk with his hand outstretched. He had a smooth, practiced glide and a smile that spread across his face.

Wilder's blue eyes were topped by a full head of blonde hair and some softening strands of brown in the combed-back layers. Although he was in his early fifties, there was no hint of gray. He appeared to be dressed and ready to stand in front of his congregation, wearing a pair of sharply-creased tan slacks, a deep powder-blue sport coat, and a black silk shirt. Instead of a clerical collar, he wore a gold chain that looped under the shirt collar and came to rest just below the open top-button. At the end of the chain was a large gold crucifix that swayed back and forth across his chest as he moved.

"Good morning, Mr. Fallon."

He stood to greet him, running his hand instinctively through his own tousled mixture of grey swirls and bald spots. Then he tried to straighten his jacket. Wilder grabbed at his hand and gripped it between both of his own two hands with a firm shaking motion.

"How are you?" Wilder stared into his eyes, squeezing them with the same intensity as the grip on his hand.

"I think I see a little distress on your face – like you could use a bit of God's good news this morning. I hope you're coming over to the Church for the services."

"I'm afraid I'll have to be right here, watching the services on the monitor."

Wilder's eyes hadn't moved, but a half-grin curled up from his mouth. "Of course, we need you up here to keep everyone safe."

"Please, have a seat."

"No, I'm afraid I can't sit down, Mr. Fallon. There's a meeting right now in Mr. Blaiseck's office with some out-of-town people from the Foundation, and I told him I would drop in for a few minutes."

He brightened up his smile a bit, showing a few more teeth. "I suppose he feels more comfortable with the chairman of the board in the meeting, perhaps to give things a little spiritual perspective."

"What can I do for you?"

Wilder gave a slight shrug. "Mr. Blaisek thought you might be able to assist us with a few security issues, nothing too serious I would think. But it's good to plan these things. Has he mentioned that we're having a meeting with some important folks next month?"

"We've talked about it."

"We're hosting a small reception at our home a few blocks from here. There'll be some Congressmen there along with a few other dignitaries. You know how that can get. They could draw some demonstrators and other trouble-makers. I just want to make sure that the Missus here has nothing to worry about."

He gestured towards his wife. Up to that point, Susan Wilder had said nothing.

"Maybe you two could get together next week and go over the plans."

"I'd be happy to work with you."

Susan Wilder gave him a friendly nod, and he returned the smile.

"Good. I just want to make sure that my wife and daughter have nothing to worry about. You've met my daughter, Alexi, have you not?"

He told Wilder that he had. "Coincidentally, I saw her on last night's security video running out of the church. I hope everything is okay."

He knew the minute he said it that it was mistake. If there had been an altercation in the church the night before, he would have heard about it by now. But what he said appeared to have touched a nerve with Reverend Wilder. He could almost feel a chill in the room.

A few seconds slipped past, as Wilder said nothing. His smile was still as rigid as before, but something had changed. What was it – maybe a slight twitch of the lip or some other movement? Wilder’s attention seemed to have shifted to a point somewhere behind his own eyes.

“The Lord has blessed us with a beautiful daughter.”

His eyes held steady, as his focus drifted more and more inward.

“Do any of us really understand the nature of temptation and the continual presence of sin? Do you, Mr. Fallon?”

It was framed as a question, but he didn’t seem to be looking for an answer.

“You used to be a policeman, so you probably know as much as anyone how we all live our days on the edge of perdition. It can destroy us. We’re really only sustained by God’s willingness to forgive us again and again and welcome us back.”

Wilder’s words hung out there, seemingly untethered to anything at all.

A few moments elapsed – just long enough for him to feel a sense of embarrassment on behalf of Susan Wilder, who had hardly moved from the doorway.

“I don’t understand. Has someone harmed your daughter?”

Wilder’s demeanor changed again, as he worked his back to the easy charm of the man who had walked into the room earlier.

“No, no – nothing like that.”

He gave a broad smile. He was now miles away from the sense of damnation that seemed to be in the forefront of his mind just moments before.

“I’ll leave you two to chat a little bit.” He had gathered himself together, making clear that he was ready to leave.

“Maybe you two can set up a meeting in the next day or so. In the meantime, I’ll be leading the congregation in prayer this morning on the role of families. They’re the most important part of God’s

plan, Mr. Fallon. You might think that's some sort of an old-fashioned idea, and I couldn't fault you for that. But I believe in it fervently."

Wilder was in an almost playful mood, reaching out with one hand to grab him for a handshake and poking him lightly in the stomach with the other. As he did so, he pulled on the open jacket, acting surprised at finding a holster and pistol.

"I see you're carrying a gun this morning, Mr. Fallon" He looked up and smiled. "That's good. You never know when we might need you to shoot somebody."

He gave a little wink.

"You know I'm a man of Faith, so I don't condone violence, but there are times when you need to defend yourself with a weapon." He paused, as he let the idea sink in.

"Mrs. Wilder and I took target practice at a firing range a few months ago, so that we'd know how to use a gun if we had to." He gestured towards his wife. "The Missus, here, is quite a good shot."

His big smile returned. "So if I were you Mr. Fallon, I'd be careful."

Wilder turned and left, seemingly amused at his own comments. The room seemed suddenly lighter.

Susan Wilder sat quietly for a few moments, clutching at the small purse in her lap as she stared at the door where her husband had just left. This was a sadder side of Susan Wilder. He'd only seen her in groups of people, mingling with visitors. Around the church, she was thought of as the informal greeter-in-chief, always wearing a big smile and giving a personal welcome to anyone who walked in the door.

She wasn't smiling now. She cried quietly to herself for a few moments until she opened up her purse and took out a tissue, giving her nose a polite blow. She dabbed her face slightly below each eye, looking for any lingering moisture. Finally, she seemed as composed as she could make herself.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Fallon. I don’t know why I started crying. Those things he said when you mentioned our daughter . . . It’s just so embarrassing”

“You don’t have to apologize. . . . And please, if you like, you can call me Davey.”

“Thank you.”

She had her head turned away slightly, looking inward again. Her hand grasped at her mouth.

“I think my husband’s relationship with Alexi is very hard on him right now.”

She paused a second, stifling a tiny sob.

“I remember right after we adopted her, Allen was so close to her. She was just a little girl, and he used to roll around on the floor with her, laughing and playing as he tickled her and nuzzled her. They were like a couple of kittens. You wouldn’t know that side of my husband, if you only saw him carrying around the burdens of our congregation. But it’s true.”

“I grew up as an orphan. I didn’t have that kind of relationship with anyone, so that kind of love within our little family is so very important to me. They are the two people I love the most, and it gave my heart such joy to see them so close.”

She looked up, maybe trying to gauge his reaction.

“She’s just at that age where she thinks anything Allen does is wrong. I know that, because I have to listen to her complaints. And I do listen – I really do. I love Alexi dearly. But sometimes it’s so hard when she goes off in directions where . . . I don’t know, but sometime I think maybe her fantasies have gotten the best of her. Allen is very strict. He lives – really, we both live – by all of the Biblical injunctions. I think she may be rebelling against that.”

She stared away for a moment.

“He seems to think that maybe she’s being harassed or threatened by someone, but I don’t know. Sometimes I think he exaggerates just like she does.”

“Well, you’re right to be cautious.”

Why was she was telling him this? He liked Susan Wilder, but he wasn't comfortable listening to her go back and forth over the same ground. One moment she was talking like her world was falling apart, and the next moment she was belittling the whole thing, apologizing for taking up his time. She finally got around to suggesting that maybe they could meet on Thursday at her house to talk about security. He said that would be fine.

"Thank you for letting me babble on about my daughter."

He told her he didn't mind listening. But even as he said it, he knew he couldn't be of much help to her. Of all the people in the world he was probably the least qualified to deal with a father-daughter problem.

He called John Blaiseck's office moments later.

"Yeah, what do you need?"

"Reverend Wilder was here a while ago and wants me to set up security for the reception at his house. Is that something you want me to do?"

"Give him whatever he wants."

"Okay, I'll arrange it. But let me ask you something else. I got the impression they're having problems with their daughter. Is that anything I need to know about?"

"There's nothing to concern yourself about."

"But if she's being threatened by someone . . ."

"Look, if there's anything you need to deal with, I'll let you know."

The parking lot cameras were bringing in all kinds of data, as cars crowded into the lot with people heading for the Sunday services. The videos could be sorted out later on, if necessary, by license-plate number, date, or any other way. Surveillance in the church followed the same pattern. Hidden

cameras recorded everything the congregants did while they were in the anteroom and sanctuary. Whenever he thought about it, he realized he hated what he was doing. The heavy surveillance was Blaiseck's idea. He and Wilder had been spooked a few months earlier when some pro-choice demonstrators sprung up out of nowhere right at the doors to the sanctuary. But the whole thing seemed excessive. The people milling around in the anteroom seemed to be in a happy mood. He couldn't see what they got out of being there – If he had, he might have envied them. But they were there for some sort of spiritual reasons, and he felt funny about spying on them like they were criminals.

The video images from the anteroom didn't show anything out of the ordinary. Mostly, it was just the regular congregants. Susan was in the middle of them, smiling and talking. She had apparently put aside – for the moment, at least – the things that had bothered her a little while earlier. She was talking to a somewhat tall, thin woman he'd never seen before. The woman had an air about her that was different from the people who usually showed up at these services, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. Susan seemed to be introducing her to some of the other congregants, which was the kind of thing she always did at the Sunday services. Then something caught his eye, as he looked at the corner of the screen, Alexi suddenly emerged from one of the side doors and started walking quickly in the direction of her mother. Was she really as angry as she looked?

He knew more than he wanted to know about a daughter's anger – his own daughter, Mandy, hadn't spoken to him in more than eight years. In his battles with her mother, Jennifer, leading up to their divorce, Mandy had a front-row seat. She'd never gotten over it. His role had been shameful, but he realized that too late to do anyone any good. One fight blended into another. Mostly, it was a lot of yelling and name-calling, but a couple of times he grabbed her to make her stop. He didn't think he had really hit her, but the investigator decided that's what it was. Whatever you called it, he wasn't proud of what happened. He knew at the time that it was wrong, even when he was trying to rationalize it.

He was forced to go to a men's counseling group. The judge didn't give him much choice – it was either do that or spend time in jail on a spousal-battery charge. He sat through the meetings, listening to the tales of the other men – all ex-batterers in one stage or another of recovery. After a few meetings, it was time for him to tell his own story in front of the group. He was more nervous than he thought he would be, standing in front of those hardened faces. He began repeating the story he had been telling himself about how he wanted to make everything work in their marriage. He had tried to work things out, but Jennifer had fought him. And then it got to a point . . .

But at that moment a young man with rolled up sleeves and tattoos up both arms burst in on his carefully prepared speech. “That’s a bunch of shit – tell us what you really felt when you hit her.”

He tried to protest, but the other guy was having none of it.

“I don’t care if you’re a cop or not. You went through the same thing as the rest of us, but you’re afraid to admit it. You think you’re the only one that’s happened to? Everyone tells you that you should be boss in your family. So there you are – trying to be King Shit in your own little world – and something happens to piss you off and the bottom drops out of everything. You suddenly realize you’re nothing. You’re dead inside. That’s when you hit her. So why don’t you just say it?”

Dead inside – the phrase had stuck with him, and it was hard to shake. He tried to come to terms with Jennifer later on, exchanging letters with her before she died of cancer. But Mandy was a different matter. He called her a few times, but she didn’t call back. He finally wrote to her after her mother died but got only a cool response. He’d learned a few months ago that Mandy was pregnant. He thought he should write again, but he didn’t know what to say. Mandy, he realized, could be suffering from the same thing as he was. She’d found herself on the front lines of a war, and it had wormed its way inside her.

The day was impossibly long. When he finally got home, there was a message on the phone from Robin, apologizing for everything that happened the night before. He called her back and left his own long apology on her answering machine. This was the story of their relationship – always talking past each other, always trying to make the other feel better, and always failing at it.

He grabbed a few left-overs out of the refrigerator and set them down in a plate next to his computer so that he could munch on them later. He didn't have much of an appetite. He unbuckled his shoulder holster and set it down on the other side of the desk. The wooden butt of his Smith & Wesson stuck out of the leather pouch, inviting him to give it a little squeeze. It was a short barreled weapon – nothing fancy about it. He knew some guys who spent a lot of time at gun shows, and they were always pushing him to get one of the newer models. He considered most of that just bullshit, and he told them so. His Model 27 had been with him since his days as a cop, and he'd be lost without it. He used it only a couple of times while he was on the force – once as a warning shot, and another time to wound a fleeing suspect in the leg. But shooting someone wasn't the point. His pistol was really just an extension of himself. He'd had it with him for years, cradled quietly under his arm, waiting for the moment it might be needed.

He had only one thing planned for the evening. It was something he did every year, but he had to gear himself up emotionally. This was the day when he always wrote to Carolyn to talk about her brother. Jimmy had died forty-five years ago –forty-five years to the day, exactly, in a miserable ditch right next to him. He knew she'd be waiting for the message. Often their string of emails would get so intense, that one or the other would pick up the phone to put a voice to their shared memories. The conversations weren't all heavy or sad, but sometimes the emotional context could turn on a dime. Carolyn sometimes made a point of singing some of the songs that her brother had loved to sing and play in his folk-singing days, her voice resonating with an eerie resemblance to that of her brother. Jimmy was a fanatic about folk music, and that was just at a time when other musicians were picking up

amplified guitars and plunging into rock and roll. He never did find a guitar in Vietnam. Instead, he'd just sit in the dark, singing his favorite ballads, as he moved his long fingers along an imaginary keyboard, trying to keep his muscle-memory alive for the day when he would once again be able to play.

The name of LouAnn, Jimmy's girl-friend, often came up in the conversation. He knew Carolyn had kept in touch with her, so he usually asked how she was and how she was getting along. He'd never met LouAnn, but he felt close to her because of the common bond they had with Jimmy. He always wondered what her life was like after his death.

Carolyn at one point sent him a copy of a picture that Jimmy had sent her from Viet Nam. He had written across the front of it "Me and my best buddy." It was sitting now in a silver frame on his shelf. The day that picture was taken was one that had stuck in his mind. The two of them standing in front of a run-down building, arms around each other's shoulders and laughing at the camera. They were both flashing peace signs.

It was a happy memory wedged in between a lot of sad ones. They had a couple of days leave in Saigon, and he and Jimmy had peeled themselves away from the others. The two of them seemed to hit it off better than either of them did with the rest of the squad. The building where the picture had been taken was a brothel. They had both been drinking for most of the afternoon before they made the decision to pay the girls a visit. He remembered laughing about it as they worked their way down the street, with him kidding Jimmy about where they were headed.

"What's LouAnn going to say, if she finds out?" The cheap beer was making him a little silly.

"Oh, shit" Jimmy drawled, "Lou wouldn't mind if" And then he broke out in laughter.

By the time they entered the brothel, they were both in full hysterics. They took a look at the girls, and then they looked at each other. They decided then and there that they didn't really want to spend any time with that sad group of teenagers lined up along the wall. They retreated outside, handed a passerby the camera and a dollar bill, and asked him to take their picture.

His conversations with Carolyn were an odd kind of ritual – even he had to admit that. Was it a symptom of PTSD? He didn't really know. As far as he could tell, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder wasn't even diagnosed prior to the Vietnam War, so maybe vets like him were moving through life, discovering new pieces of it as they went along. His annual exchange of memories with Carolyn had gone on far longer than he ever thought it would. One time he hinted that maybe they should stop doing it every year, but she broke down crying. Then he started crying with her. He knew what she was thinking: if they ever stopped talking about Jimmy, then he would truly be forever dead.

There was one memory they didn't talk about. He never told Carolyn about it, and he didn't even mention it to Jimmy when he was alive. It would have been too embarrassing. After all these years, someone hearing the story might find it more endearing than scandalous, but he kept it to himself nevertheless.

One afternoon the two of them found themselves in a ramshackle building where their squad had been stopped for over an hour. Jimmy had received a letter and a photo that morning from LouAnn, and he was anxious to find a place to read it. He located a spot behind the building, knowing his buddy would cover for him. But the spot he chose turned out to be not all that private. Through the broken walls at the back of the building, Jimmy could be seen holding the letter with the photo propped up in front of him.

He couldn't help but look at him. There was a different kind of expression on Jimmy's face. And after a few moments he realized why: Jimmy's pants were open and he was stroking himself. That vision froze him for a second. After a few moments he looked away, trying to sort out his emotions. He had never seen another man do that. But gradually over the next several minutes he convinced himself that there was nothing shameful about it. It was the most natural thing in the world. He could imagine himself in that situation, and he'd probably do the same thing.

Over the years, those few moments had mellowed in his mind, becoming another very personal thing to add to the memory of his friend. But at the time, he wanted nothing more than to be protective of Jimmy, while he continued with his lonely act of love.