

ONE

Jack Vu searched in vain for his pills. Unable to still his anxiety, he again checked his watch. Amtrak's Crescent from New York City to New Orleans was behind schedule. The passenger train was due at 2200 hours. It was now past midnight.

A chill crept up his body from the leaden pavement, the origin of which seemed more than the damp night or his fretful nature. Yet he couldn't put his finger on it. He flipped up the stiff collar of his wool coat and continued his solitary vigil. Fog descended over the depot, its silent jaws slowly swallowing the hazy glow of the yard lamps. Miles of deserted track fused Vu's worrisome thoughts. *Relax*. It was just fatigue, he reassured himself. It'd been a very long day. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Sergeant, why don't you go inside and grab some coffee?" Vu's eyes snapped open as a young military policeman approached on the platform. "I'll call if I hear it coming."

"Thanks, but I need the fresh air." Vu said.

"Suit yourself."

The SP reached inside his jacket and removed a mustard-stained napkin. He blew his runny nose, then walked off and tossed the tissue in a can nearby. Vu wondered why he'd struck

up a conversation with the young man earlier, inside the depot. It ran contrary to his solitary nature. He'd said nothing special to the airman, but now he couldn't shake him. What had he said his name was? Ronny? Airman First Class, Ronny?

Ronny returned, rubbing his hands together to stay warm. Cloudy jets of moist breath sprayed from the young man's nostrils.

"It's freezing out here," Ronny said.

Vu reluctantly nodded. A Buddhist, Vu accepted it might be his path this lifetime to change his comfortable isolation. *But did he have to start that journey tonight?*

"Who ya waitin' for again?" Ronny persisted.

Vu winced as the SP snorted back phlegm and spat on the ground.

"A friend."

"Military?"

"No."

"Me neither."

Vu smiled absently. After an awkward pause, the kid turned and struck up a conversation with another stranger. Smokers huddled on the platform. But Ronny's chattering, the frigid weather, the massive decaying depot – it was all getting to him.

Surrendering, Vu drove his hands into his pockets and located the missing bottle. After the Lyman case he thought he wouldn't need them any more. He shook the green pills into his hand, found a faucet near the entrance to the depot and chased them down with rancid tap water.

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Two blocks east of the train station behind a deserted warehouse, former Buck Sergeant Bud Cooper lazed behind the wheel of a rental car, smoking. Cooper breathed in the damp air and watched the westbound tracks. *Anytime now...*

He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket, checked the train number one last time, then crumpled it and dumped it in the

ashtray. He used his cigarette to kindle the paper. When he was finished, he defragged the filter and tossed it out the window in the same calculated manner as the last two smokes.

Cooper rubbed the rough scar on his cheek, the result of a bar fight in Germany, the closest he'd ever gotten to combat. He'd been a three-striper back then working on his second hitch when he fell for a shit-hot female dope dealer, got addicted to pussy and crack, and ended his military career in the brig. Since he knew weapons and small unit tactics – and a less than honorable discharge didn't help him find regular work – he turned to what he knew.

Cooper checked his image in the rearview mirror. The scar was history. The makeup he'd boosted from the hooker in Gulfport had done the job.

From the trunk, Cooper removed a duffel bag and placed it on the fender. He opened the bag and reached inside. A 1951 High Standard "Super-Matic" .22 complete with homemade plastic Coke bottle silencer duct taped to the muzzle was suspended in the center of an empty half-rack of Budweiser. Two cardboard templates mounted crossways held the pistol steady. He'd used a K-bar to cut the slot in the duffel; allowing ample room for his hand to reach up inside and locate the trigger. Cooper slammed the trunk lid and retied his boots. No sound of the train's rumble yet. He slung the duffel over his shoulder, adjusted the six-inch slot on the left side about midway, and began walking.

Cooper was proud of his work. He slid his hand in through the hole and touched the trigger. It felt like wet pussy...

It'd taken several hundred rounds and two duffel bags to work out all the bugs. The pistol was old, but that was the point. It had been a rare score on the street. He was impressed with the weapon, but not the spook who'd sold it to him. He remembered shaking his head at that amateur Aunt Jemima's furtive glances over his shoulder and the obvious way he'd shielded the pistol with his jacket as he passed it off.

"Hey, whatcha doin, man!" he'd squealed, dancing around nervously. Cooper got out the squib he'd prepared earlier. The

shine freaked.

“Back off,” Cooper said, holding the cartridge out for him to see. “It’s a blank, all right? I pulled the bullet and dumped the powder. I wanna test it.”

“Hey, Jessie James, I told you it works. Don’t you trust Daddy C?”

“I don’t even trust myself.” Cooper said.

He dropped the blank into the chamber, pointed the gun at the spent needles and condoms strewn around the alley floor, and squeezed the trigger. The click was louder, like a crackly lady-finger, but the tongue of flame at the muzzle assured him the primer at the base of the cartridge had ignited.

Cooper pulled back the slide and caught the shell as the gun spat it out. The dent where the firing pin had hit was clean, even and deep.

He dropped the pistol into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. You could never tell anymore about these fuckin’ spooks. Some of them didn’t know jack about the merchandise.

Cooper pointed his fingers like a gun at the black man and made a skull-like grin. Daddy flinched, but never let his eyes leave the wad of twenties wedged in Cooper’s fingers.

“Okay! We cool then?”

Cooper nodded, allowing the money to slip out of his grip. The man reached out and snatched the cash. Cooper latched onto the man’s arm.

“I have another request...”

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Vu detected a low vibration under his feet and peered down the tracks. The engine’s pulsating spotlight carved a hole in the dense fog. The shrill sounding whistle shattered the silence of the depot.

Anxious family members spilled out of the station and pressed toward the train. Maybe he could relax now. Perhaps the crawling skin had been nothing more than the itchy wool sweater he’d put

on today. Betty told him he looked good enough to eat in it when she'd given it to him. He'd worn it tonight simply to please her.

The Crescent steamed into the station like a gallant ship. Her engines deafened and her exhaust bellowed. Vu covered his ears as the enormous hulk of pounding pistons rolled by. He calculated sixteen cars in all, a massive modern day feat of aluminum, iron, and steel.

Two conductors simultaneously popped out of the first and second passenger cars. One placed a portable step on the pavement while the other opened the side door to the baggage car and began unloading suitcases. Some of the train's curtains opened. Sleepy faces peered out. The wait seemed to take forever before passengers disembarked. Vu hated being boxed in by crowds. It made his survival mode switch to high gear.

As the platform swelled with bodies, Vu stood on tiptoe, his view shadowed by the onslaught of taller Americans. He remained attentive to avoid being trampled by a sea of bodies swaying toward the terminal. He watched four boys jumped down out of one of the cars carrying backpacks, followed by a second wave of passengers lugging heavy suitcases. A young couple broke free of the crowd, racing into each other's arms. Through the swarm of bodies, Vu thought he caught a familiar glimpse through a window.

Betty?

Instead, a young airman in a wrinkled uniform hopped down out of the cabin. Another weary soldier heading back to base, he assumed. The steam and clatter of the engines and the loud droning sound of voices broke his focus. A clumsy passenger swayed past and smacked his ankle with a vintage trunk. Then another jostled him from behind.

As he regained his footing, he caught sight of the back of a man's head wearing a baseball cap and lugging an Army duffel, bullying his way through the arriving passengers. The man searched each approaching face before his head finally locked on a target. Vu's nostrils flared an alert and his eyes narrowed. Time stopped.

"Jack! Over here!"

Betty appeared from the middle cabin, grinning at Vu, dragging two bulging suitcases and a hatbox. On her head was a plastic crown of the Statue of Liberty. Relieved and distracted, Vu dashed toward her. As Betty embraced him, he spun her around and scanned the crowd.

Her lips opened in a welcome kiss, then snapped shut.

“Jack?”

Jack was not smiling up to kiss her. He wasn't even aware of her. Instinctively, she turned toward his line of vision.

Vu craned to get a better look at the man in the baseball cap. Then he spotted the tired soldier approaching through the crowd. The stalker shifted the duffel and approached the soldier, meeting him with a venomous grin. Recognition flashed in the soldier's eyes as both he and Vu stared into the abyss of death.

Instinctively, Vu pushed Betty to the ground. He pulled out his gun. “Don't move!”

The soldier's silent cry went unheard, drowned out by the noisy chaos in the station. Two rapid, muffled, hollow points exploded his intestines while a third bullet shattered the soft cartilage between his eyes.

The crowd froze. Then a lone woman stumbled backwards under the dead weight of the soldier falling into her arms. Her legs trembled as she struggled to break his fall but his lifeless gravity overpowered her. The soldier's body slapped the pavement. The woman looked down at her quivering hands, smeared with a stranger's blood.

Through the chaos, Vu espied the baseball hat just disappearing onto the train as he encountered the collapsed soldier. Gasps of air frittered away from the boy's lips. Blood spilled from his forehead and two faint red trails oozed across his uniform. Vu stooped and checked his pulse, as life poured from his body. *Breathe*. Faint, then nothing...

The blood-smeared woman stared down at the soldier, a low keen escaping from her lips. Several screams echoed out as panicked passengers ran for the safe harbor of the depot.

Ronny scrambled toward Vu. "What the fuck just happened, man?"

"There's been a shooting."

"No shit?"

Ronny focused on the twitching body. Suddenly, his face emptied. He sucked in a trembling breath, then reeled instinctively in panic.

"Don't let anyone leave the area." Vu said. It was an order that fell on deaf ears.

With his gun drawn, Vu boarded the train and ran through the empty passenger cars. *The lavatories?* Then he heard someone shouting outside.

Vu looked out the compartment window. He saw a flashlight shining on a dark field on the far side of the depot and for a moment made out what looked like a man falling on the eastbound tracks. He strained to see through the fog and exhaust, but before he could be certain, the figure had disappeared in the vapor.

Vu checked his watch; it was 0048 hours.