

Silent Partner

By Jennifer Chase

Prologue

1969

The rain had finally stopped on the twenty-sixth consecutive day of downpours. It was only a brief reprieve. There was an intense humidity that reeked from the undergrowth of the dense, twisted jungle foliage and saturated earth. The heavy air made it difficult to breathe as the men trudged onward. The sticky uniforms that clung to the bodies of the weary soldiers and was a constant reminder of the unbearable weather, while happier memories of being home back in the United States seemed to be constantly on their minds.

The U.S. Army Platoon of the 26th Infantry found themselves deep inside the jungles of Vietnam fighting a war that they didn't completely understand. Many of the men were barely eighteen years old and still lived at home with their parents and were from small towns in places like Iowa, Delaware, and Indiana. They continued to trudge onward with a moderate amount of stealth through the overgrown vegetation.

Carrying his military weapon, poised, and eyeing every possible moving shadow around him that might resemble the enemy, Alec Weaver continued walking in his point position as a combat tracker that assisted the army platoon. They were looking for rogue, enemy assassins. It wasn't the choice spot for any soldier, but it was different for him

and he didn't mind it. He knew that he was safe as his eyes dropped down in front of him looking at Max.

A regal German shepherd dutifully guided the men with his ears perked and alert, head low, with keen dog senses picking up everything around them as he trailed a thick tail against a lean ninety-five pound body. The humidity didn't seem to be a problem for the canine. He was oblivious to the discomforts of the jungle because he had a job to do and he knew how to do it well.

Alec's combat tracking team consisted of five men, including himself and he was the dog handler. Butch was the combat's team leader and had most of the experience in the group, even though was only two years older than the rest of the team. He was from a tiny town in Indiana that most had never heard of in casual conversation. The coverman was Tom and he was an expert in weapons, but a man of very few words. The visual tracker was Brett and he was the jokester of the group and there were times that the entire platoon needed some comic relief, but he definitely knew his stuff when it came to tracking. The RTO or radio-telephone operator was Terry and he was probably the most educated with only three semesters of college under his belt and the most conservative of the group. He wanted to become a lawyer and if he survived the jungles in Vietnam, there's not doubt that he would succeed.

Alec had spent several months training with Max in obedience training and then on to the combat tracker dog handler course, he was hand picked to be a handler from a list of volunteers. He had grown up with dogs at home in Los Angeles, but he had never trained in the capacity that he now found himself. He knew exactly how to read the dog, every little twitch, hesitation, and snaps of the head were clear signals to him. These

dogs were trained to detect trip wires, snipers, and any type of booby traps set to kill enemy soldiers by the most hideous means.

Max was an exceptional dog, intelligent and the most loyal best friend anyone could ask for in the current foreign nightmare. The unbearable nightmare had gone on long enough, but there was a job to be done. Having Max at his side made it a little more bearable for Alec who was only days away from his nineteenth birthday. At least he had hoped that he would live to see another birthday. Alec remembered the motto that was ingrained in him from superiors and trainers, “train hard, fight easy”.

Max stopped.

He stared straight ahead.

The dog didn't move his position, his head was held high and his breathing turned shallow. Waiting. Deducing what was up ahead and what it meant to their immediate safety.

Alec was accessing happy childhood memories through his mind to pass the time and almost stepped on Max's hind feet. He abruptly stopped and read the dog. He raised his hand to alert the rest of the platoon to stop.

Everyone halted in their tracks, daring not to move.

It was eerily quiet, too quiet. The men scanned the jungle all around expecting the worst and asking themselves silently who would be the next fatality. A couple of the men actually twitched with agonizing anticipation.

The vines and overgrown leaves dripping with moisture seemed to slowly close in on them. It was nature's subtle way of alerting them that something wasn't where it was supposed to be at the moment. It was unnatural.

Max tweaked his right ear backward assessing any subtle sound around the group.

Alec felt a chill, goosebumps appeared on his arms, and he could feel cold perspiration roll down the back of his neck.

It was completely silent and the tension throughout the group was elevated.

In slow motion, Max sat down and kept his gaze forward. He was firmly planted and it was obvious that he wasn't going to move.

Alec knew too well what Max had caught wind of and he gradually began to move cautiously until he spotted the trip wire that had been cleverly concealed. He had seen what this type of booby trap could do to a man. In an instant, limbs and other body pieces were savagely torn from the body leaving behind a bloody mass of gristle that was once a living, breathing human being. The only good aspect was that death was instantaneous, at least most of the time, but it alerted the enemy that there were more possible casualties to be had.

Alec gestured to the others that a trip wire was present. It was one of many that they had encountered over the past several months. Max stood and crept closer to the wire and stepped over it. The men followed the same action and continued their trek through the jungle.

A twig snapped.

Max immediately began to bark ferociously, looking upward.

Alec swung his weapon toward the faint noise and spotted an enemy sniper huddled in a tree, he opened fire, riddling bullets through the trees, almost cutting that part of the forest in half. Several other soldiers fired at the tree in unison. The enemy soldier fell to the ground with a thud, never moving again.

Max quickly went back to his point position and continued to lead the group deeper into the dense jungles of Vietnam. There were more enemy soldiers – waiting for them.

1983

Jack Davis pumped his skinny eight-year-old legs faster as his bike zoomed down a dirt road just before the O’Connell’s rundown farm. It was summer and nothing could stand in his way to be outside, free from chores, and at his favorite fishing hole with his best friend. It was the greatest time of the year. School was something in the past and not even a slight thought for the near future. His best friend Pete was meeting him at their secret fishing spot with some new glowworms that he had confiscated from his older brother.

Two police cars followed by a tan four-door car sped past Jack with their lights flashing, no sirens. Jack pulled his bike over to the side of the road next to a broken fence and watched as the emergency vehicles turned down the O’Connell’s long dirt driveway. Dust plumed up into the air in a massive beige cloud making it difficult to see the farmhouse. Less than two minutes later, a white van at a much slower speed, followed the previous cars and disappeared down the driveway.

It was obvious that something terrible had happened. Jack had heard stories at school about the monster that lived at the O’Connell farm. At least that’s what they called him, but in reality Mr. O’Connell was a bad man and his wife and two daughters suffered the most from it.

When he was sure that there weren't any more police vehicles racing to the farm, Jack squeezed through the broken fence pushing his bike and then eased down toward the commotion. He jumped back on the bike and coasted down the hill. The bumpy back road jarred his bones, but his curiosity as well as concern seemed to get the better of him.

Jack watched as two sheriff deputies roughly escorted Mr. O'Connell from the house, his arms were behind his back, wrists secured in handcuffs, and his head was hung forward as he stared aimlessly at the ground. He was barely dressed in a grubby white t-shirt, blue jeans, and barefooted. It looked like he hadn't shaved or bathed in a week as his greasy dark brown hair was matted against the back of his skull.

There were grim expressions on the deputy's faces as they put the man in the backseat of the patrol car and slammed the door shut. It was clearly evident that they had witnessed the pure evil of what one person could do to another.

Jack slowly rolled his bike as close as he dared. His first thought was that of the two sisters, Teresa who was eight and in his class, and Megan who had just turned five. He had taken them fishing several times.

Where were they?

Are they okay?

He expected to see Mrs. O'Connell any moment, but she never emerged through the front door. She was always nice to Jack and the other children, but it was clear that she suffered in silence from the abuse she had endured for so many years.

A tall, dark haired woman with authority finally led the two little girls from the house to her car. Jack was somewhat relieved to see that the girls were okay, but it still

meant that something terrible had happened to their mom. The woman took a few minutes to secure the girls safely in the back seat of the car.

Jack found himself being pulled by an imaginary force toward the scene to see what had happened. He didn't know exactly why, but he just had to know. Call it intense curiosity, but he also felt a need to protect his friends from harm. That was a big burden for any eight year old to carry. He remembered hearing that they had grandparents from somewhere in California that were wealthy and maybe they would go live with them.

He slowed his bike next to the tan car, planting his feet firmly on the ground. Teresa stared straight ahead and didn't show any expression or movement, she appeared to be in a trance trying desperately to block out the horrifying scene she had experienced. Megan slowly turned her petite face to look at Jack, her intense dark eyes searched his face for some type of explanation of what had happened and why. It wasn't immediately apparent to the naked eye, but she was tortured by what she had endured in her short life and what she had seen.

Jack froze, his eyes remained locked on Megan's intense stare. One of the deputies saw him next to the car and told him to leave. For the first time, he looked inside the main entrance of the farmhouse and saw a plain white sheet spotted with bright red smears covering a body that was no doubt Mrs. O'Connell. There was blood splattered on the walls infused with bone and brain matter. It was obvious that there had been several shotgun blasts fired inside the house. It was the most grisly thing that Jack had ever seen in his young life. He could barely comprehend what he was seeing, but it stirred something deep within him. Something had awakened. He knew that this

experience would be forever imprinted in his mind and shape some of the choices he would make later in his life.

A deputy took hold of Jack's arm and gently steered him away from the scene. Jack kept his eyes on Megan as she watched him leave the farm. He felt his heart weigh heavy on his little chest. He wanted to help her, but there was nothing that he could do. He could only imagine what she was going through and how it had changed everything she knew up to this point about life and people that you were supposed to trust.

Chapter One

Current day...

It was dark. It was cold. It was completely quiet. There were no windows or doors. Escape was futile. There was a distinct smell of disinfectant along with a hint of mold that attacked the senses. It made it difficult to breathe and air seemed to get trapped in the lungs without anywhere else to go.

The waiting game was only putting off the inevitable.

Death.

She shifted her weight a couple of inches from her left side, but the duct tape pulled on her tender skin around her wrists, ankles, and across her mouth. Her hair was caught in the tape around her mouth and face. It stung her scalp with every movement

she made. The darkness around her felt like she was suspended in space a million miles from civilization.

She vaguely remembered the events of the evening. It started out like any other night before she met her prospective clients for quick sex and then she couldn't remember how she got here. Her life had been tough at home so she decided that she needed to take control of her own life. She left home a month ago and hadn't thought about it since – until now. She missed her mom's overprotective attitude of what she should wear and her dad's persistent nagging of which college she needed to attend if she wanted to make something of herself. She never knew how much she would miss their company and how much she really loved them. She also didn't know how she could have easily been turned out into the prostitution world without even realizing what had happened until it was too late.

There was a sound like someone moving around above her. She tried to crane her neck to see any movement or light from her position. She only managed to cause herself more pain in the tight confinements of what was ultimately going to be her tomb.

Maybe someone had found her or had seen what happened?

Maybe the police were searching for her right now?

She knew that wasn't the case, but tried desperately to keep positive thoughts in her last moments on earth. It was going to be her eighteenth birthday next week. A tear appeared and rolled down her cheek. She wondered if her parents would still celebrate her birthdays after she was gone.

There was a noise again. It sounded like a metal object scrapping on a cement floor. She could feel her heart rate increase, which made it even more difficult to

breathe. Her arms and legs felt suddenly warm and clammy in the last ditch effort to move oxygen through the body. She knew that if she wasn't freed from her prison, the air supply would run out.

Footsteps approached. They were faint and sounded like the person wore rubble soled shoes. There was the sound of a latch being unlocked. Suddenly, the bright light blinded her. She couldn't see a thing, except a burning intensity making her eyes instantly water. She kept her eyes closed, but the forceful light still invaded through her eyelids. Slowly, the daylight began to darken and the room came into view.

A figure stood over her and it was backlit so that it made the person appear to be some type of apparition rather than a real, living, breathing human being.

No words were exchanged.

No plea expressed.

No demands or threats given.

There was a searing pain that impacted her stomach, followed by several more near her ribcage. She realized that she was being stabbed repeatedly and couldn't escape her ultimate fate. She had to endure the torture. The pain increased exponentially to where she couldn't breathe as her lungs filled with blood. She felt like she was drowning and the world slowly faded away – the pain was gone.

The person slammed the large toolbox shut leaving a grisly surprise for the construction crew that came to work the next day.

Chapter Two

The city streets were quiet. It was approaching 1:00am and most residents were fast asleep waiting for the next day to begin again. The sleeping neighborhoods were completely unaware of who and what roamed the streets in the middle of the night. Everyone had a story to tell and those people out in the middle of the night were no different. What made it unlike any other night was that there was a serial killer on the loose and it didn't seem like the police were any closer to catching him anytime soon. The murders were erratic and they didn't seem to have any type of connection.

The sidewalks, along with a few parked cars, were wet from a mild rain from barely a couple of hours ago. The large droplets of water on the road reflected the approaching headlights of a police cruiser. The car idled as it slowed when there were quick flashes of light. In the shadows, transients were lighting up their scrounged cigarette butts in between quick swigs of cheap booze disguised in brown paper bags. The cruiser paused for just a moment, then slowly moved on.

Deputy Jack Davis surveyed the streets with intense, dark blue eyes, casually running his fingers through his dark military haircut. He looked for anything that was suspicious or out of place. The well-seasoned instincts of being a cop for the past ten years rarely failed him.

Jack had many things weighing heavy on his mind. One of those things he was going to have out right now in the open.

He vented to his partner, "You're such an adrenaline junkie. The end doesn't justify the mans." He sighed and continued, "I can't even look at you right now. You

have to start following procedures, otherwise Sarge is going to have both our asses on suspension.”

It remained extremely quiet inside the cruiser.

Jack finally spoke again. “Just because you sleep with me doesn’t make this any easier. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

A serious, muscular one hundred pound black Labrador retriever stared at his partner from the back seat. His large square head tilted slightly to one side, his black eyes fixed at attention as he watched his partner with building curiosity.

Jack demanded. “Say something. *Anything.*”

The dog barked twice and stood up pushing his wet canine nose toward Jack and gave him a sloppy kiss on the side of his face, not forgetting the inside of his ear.

Jack smiled. For a brief moment, the authority melted away from his tense face. “Like I can stay mad at you...”

Jack roughly scratched the big dog’s ears. He was rewarded with snorts and happy low-pitched whines.

The police cruiser took a turn down an alley between two businesses that were closed. The open signs were dark and the interior was lit only by low emergency lighting illuminating a shadowy glow off of the display shelves.

The car stopped and Jack cut the engine. He kept the lights shining so he could see down the long alley. There were several dumpsters behind the electronics store and deli. The light bounced peculiar shadows and distorted perceptions from the sides of the buildings and off barred security windows.

Jack's military boots hit the pavement as he got out of the car with purpose. He walked around the cruiser to the trunk, popped it open, and pulled out three grey blankets. He slammed the trunk closed, tucked the blankets under his right arm, and walked around the car.

Every step he took, his four-legged partner watched his every move. With eyes focused and ears perked up, the dog never missed a single step or movement that Jack made. The dog's dark eyes were literally black, which gave him an almost demonic appearance.

There was a sign posted on the side of the back window of the police car that read boldly: CAUTION POLICE DOG – KENO. Printed down the side of the front doors identified the cruiser as Monterey County Sheriff.

Jack's squeaky gun belt echoed in unison with his footsteps, while he walked down the alley as a few suspicious eyes peered out at him from the deep shadows. Trash and flattened cardboard boxes littered the ground next to broken bottles that were neatly swept against the side of the building. There was some care taken to keep the glass from causing any injury to those who had to sleep there. Upon closer inspection, several homeless people were hidden beneath the city's refuse cloaked in several layers of clothing with a few precious personal belongings clutched at their sides.

A young woman barely in her twenties with short blonde hair and a five-year-old child huddled together in their filthy clothing, shivering slightly from the damp evening. She hoped and prayed that the child protective services weren't going to find her and take her sweet baby. The local homeless shelter had only a few beds even for women and children. When they were already occupied, there was nothing else that they could do

but find the safest place to hide out for the night. This was the next safest place to be for them. It was away from the usual areas of downtown and under the bridge. It was cold, but they would be safe for another night.

Jack slowed his pace and with careful discretion he unfolded the blankets and gently wrapped them round the woman and little girl. They didn't say a word to him, but their eyes conveyed gratitude. It was difficult for Jack to just leave the homeless behind to shiver in the night, but he turned and kept his focus on the cruiser as he walked back.

Jack didn't raise his eyes to look through the windshield until he was seated back inside his warm cruiser. There were several sets of eyes that reflected from the harsh headlights, but they seemed to be more curious than wary of his presence. Some nameless faces had seen him before, especially on extreme cold nights and holidays. He resembled a dark knight coming to the aid of his homeless kingdom.

The cruiser slowly backed up and then disappeared into the night. The lights flashed like ghostly shadows for two seconds and then vanished as quickly as they had appeared. Once again, the alley was dark, quiet, and cold.