



- One -

This was back in 1970 when I went from wounded hero to deserter and headed up to Canada so as to stay out of prison. I was traveling with Sheri Cooper, who was set on joining a commune on Vancouver Island where some friends of hers from the Haight had gone on before.

I'd met Sheri in Golden Gate Park right after I arrived in San Francisco from New York via Chicago, Madison, Wisconsin, Denver, and a few other towns. I'd been watching a theater group do some antiwar skits on a little stage they'd set up. The bits were funny but at the same time scary in how they caught the craziness that was the war.

I wondered if seeing the skit before I was drafted would have prompted me to do more to stay out of the service. Probably not. I knew it was possible to resist the draft—I mean, Mohammad Ali had done it all over the front pages and the back pages of the *News* and the *Post*, so it wasn't a secret. But he had had the guts to stand up and take the punishment and I didn't. He was the Champ and gave it all up. I had nothing to lose and still couldn't do it.

As I was walking away after the show thinking about where I was going to lay my weary head I heard a woman's voice calling out, "Bill! Hey, Bill!" Since my name is Jay, it made no sense to look around. But I knew she meant me and I looked. She was in the crowd that had been watching the show and waved me over. I said my name was Jay and I didn't think we had ever met. She told me we never had but that she had felt a very strong vibe when I walked by and couldn't let me pass on by without calling out to me. The fact that I turned was proof that the vibe

between us was real.

We hung out for the next few weeks, heading down to Big Sur on the weekends, sleeping out on the beach, making love in the rain, and generally having a fine time. Sheri was a big girl and warm and soft, and she folded herself around me like a thick quilt. It was exactly what I needed from the world. I think I made her happy, too. At least she said I did.

Sheri had a day job but had given notice and was getting ready for her move to Vancouver. I explained my fugitive situation, but to her, that was just further confirmation that we were supposed to meet and that it was her purpose to get me out of the country. I was more than happy to believe it was true ... and anyhow, it worked out that way.

The commune was fairly copasetic. People actually worked. A lot of communes were just an excuse to lie around and get stoned until the money ran out. But this place, Pacific Breeze, was serious. The leader, Bob Zamchek, aka Ori, was an anal-compulsive former Eagle Scout who understood he had paradise for the taking. He was going to make sure it worked. Determined as he was, he was also the sweetest guy in the world and the happiest in his work that I had ever known—except possibly for some wiggled-out Special Forces guys back in Vietnam who were in heaven because they got to kill people as part of their job description.

The commune grew fruits and vegetables, and there were small but thriving herds of cows and goats and sheep. The main business, though, was the vineyard, which was still new but being coaxed along with a great deal of tender loving care. I don't recall how many acres the whole place was, but I remember being impressed. Of course, I was a city boy, so anything bigger than a city block would have impressed me.

When we got to the commune, Sheri officially changed her name to Wildflower. I should have changed my name since I was on the lam, but what did it matter? The Canadians knew who I was but didn't care. The Army knew *where* I was but couldn't do anything to me if the Canadians wouldn't help.

Except for Vietnam, I hadn't been out of the country before. In fact, except for Vietnam, I had hardly ever been out of New York before. There was no question but that I missed the city and my life there. But I knew that what I'd had was gone. Friends had moved on or were dead, and I was on the outs with my family because of my being a deserter. I could still speak to my mom, but my dad wanted nothing to do with me.

He was a genuine hero, from World War II. He'd saved his whole platoon, holding off an enemy attack while the other guys made it back to cover. I was supposed to be a hero, but what I had done was just kill a lot of Vietnamese while the rest of my platoon ran. I'd have run, too, if I'd known they had all taken off, but I was out on the end of the line and no one had bothered to tell me we were cutting out.

My father knew his brothers-in-arms were hauling ass, but he stayed on the line anyway. He got wounded, got a medal and points, and got to come home when the rest of his unit was sent to Japan. I got wounded and got a medal and the Army gave me special leave to go home for R&R. They made a mistake. Once I got stateside, I was never ever going back to that jungle.

My dad had finally gotten to be proud of me instead of pissed off at me, which was what he usually was, and I had snatched it away from him. His son the hero had become his son the deserter. We got to yelling at each other about it and he told me to turn myself in and take my punishment. It was the last thing he said to me.

As much as I hated disappointing him yet again, I couldn't deal with the twenty years in prison I'd be facing for having taken off. Maybe it would have been fewer than that, maybe more, but whatever it was, it just wasn't anything I could do. A year in Vietnam had taught me a lot about my limitations.

So I stayed on the commune and tried to figure out a way to make things right without making my life more of a mess than it already was. While I pondered, I took care of the goats, helped out in the vineyard, ran errands, and generally made myself as useful as I could be, even though I wasn't officially a member. You had to buy shares to be a real member. (As I mentioned, this was a serious place.) Most of the people at Pacific Breeze had done that, using money earned by dealing drugs or from legitimate day jobs or by cashing in the trust funds their grandpas had left them.

I didn't have any money, but even if I did I wouldn't have joined. The members, even those as young as me, had all passed through their restless years but I was still in mine. It's no good pretending to settle down when your home is somewhere else. For me, Pacific Breeze was just a good place to be at that moment when my options were so few.

Curling up each night with Wildflower was good, too. But that was

coming to an end. I could see that she and Ori were giving each other the eye. Everyone was cool, no pressure, no hurry, but cool only goes so far when a man and a woman need to get together. Sheri and I weren't in love and no one's heart was going to be broken. We had become instant great friends who had found each other at just the right moment. Now it was more a matter of where I was going to sleep when the time came to change partners. And that time was near. Maybe it was even past.



- Two -

With Wildflower and Ori wanting to get together, what I should do next was becoming more critical. I could have stayed. We were all friends, and it wasn't unusual for people to change partners without anyone having a trauma. This may sound like a lot of hippie crap today, but that's how it was. Of course, there were plenty of times when people were broken up when a lover left them for another, especially a friend. It certainly happened to me more than once (one time by sisters, Abbie then Ginnie Newman, one right after the other). All I'm saying is that a lot of the mythology of the sixties was based on reality. Often enough, we were as groovy as advertised.

That a switch was coming was obvious to all, and there were a few young women who were waiting to comfort me upon my impending loss. They, like me, were not members, just transients on the great hippie highway that stretched around the globe, working on the farm in exchange for room and board. I was envious of their freedom to move on. I could travel from one end of Canada to the other, which I figured was my next move, but once I reached the Atlantic, I couldn't see what was next except to turn around and head back west or to the far north while they could continue on to Paris, Istanbul, Katmandu, and beyond.

Then everything changed.

It was a Monday. I went into town to pick up the commune mail and a few things at the general store. The post office in Cowichan Bay was small, and there was usually only one person at work there except when

the mail was being sorted out for delivery by the two carriers. This day it was Maggie the postmistress there by herself except for the two mugs lounging near the front door.

They were both dressed in seersucker suits, which seemed totally odd for February, even though the weather was mild and totally odd was not unusual on Vancouver Island. One was tall and bald with a thick mustache to compensate for his bare head. The other was short with sharp features but spongy skin. He wore a porkpie hat. They looked ridiculous but also deadly. They gave off an air of not caring. They wouldn't care if they hurt you, and they wouldn't care either if you hurt them. Pain was for sissies. They were beyond pain.

Maggie was trying to ignore them, but it was clear they were making her nervous, hanging out looking at the notices on the bulletin board and staring out the front window. They made me nervous as soon as I saw them. There was no question in my mind but that they were there for me. They weren't Army but definitely some kind of government agents. Maybe FBI, maybe CIA, maybe something so secret no one even knew about it.

I wanted to turn and run right out the door, jump in the commune pickup, peel out, and just go as fast and as far as I could until there was no more gas, then get out and run until my sneakers fell apart. If I ran, neither of them could catch me. I could tell that just looking at them. I was fast on my feet in those days. But I could also tell by looking at them that they wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in my back.

As much time as it took these thoughts to go through my mind was as much time as they needed to close in on me.

"Jay Cardinale?" said Short One.

"Yeah." I couldn't say much. I was scared shitless. It was the most scared I'd been since coming back from the war. The most scared I'd been since Dau Tieng, when it looked like we were all going to die.

"Could you spare a few minutes?" said Short One. "For a little conversation?"

I knew he knew how scared I was. It didn't take much to see it if you knew about these things.

"Sure. Yeah. What's up?"

"There's some people want to talk to you. They're waiting over at the diner. If you don't mind ..."

The diner? This was unexpected. I figured they were going to take me for a ride. The diner was across the street. Was it a trick? I didn't move. Tall One spoke.

"Come on, bud. This won't take long."

I looked at Maggie. Was she the last friendly face I'd ever see?

"I just need to get the mail."

I went to the counter. I didn't know Maggie really well. I'd only come into the post office to get the mail maybe a half dozen times since coming to the commune. We made small talk about the weather, sports, and farming. I felt she was worried about me, but I was sure right at that moment that she was worried more about herself and would be much happier if we all left before the shooting started.

"Hi, Maggie."

"Jay?"

"You have the mail for Pacific Breeze?"

"Right here."

She had it ready and handed it to me. I put it in a bag I'd brought with me just for that purpose.

"Great. Well, gotta run. See ya."

I wanted her to press the button under the counter that would make the cops come. Then I realized I was thinking of a bank. This was the post office. I had to get a grip.

I went to the door and the seersuckers followed me out.

We crossed the street toward the diner.

"Why were you waiting in the post office?"

"Because you were coming for the mail," said Short One.

"But how did you know that?"

"We asked."

"Asked who?"

"People."

Jeez, I thought. Had they been to the commune? Had they ever come at night and stood over me while I was sleeping? Why was I thinking things like that? They were here now and they had me, so what did it matter how or when whatever else had happened.

There was a big shiny black Lincoln parked in front of the diner and we were heading toward it. They were going to take me for a ride, after all. My legs were getting wobbly. I was too scared to be embarrassed.

“I want a muffin,” I said.

“What?” said Tall One.

“A muffin. At the diner. A Saskatoon berry muffin.”

“A what-berry?”

“Saskatoon. They grow here.”

“Sure. I’ll have one, too.”

How will you have one, I thought, since we’re not going to the diner?

Except we were. We went right past the Lincoln and into the diner.

Tall One held the door then followed in behind me and Short One.

I liked the diner. They had good coffee and great muffins, especially the Saskatoon berry. The place wasn’t too crowded. Breakfast was over and lunch hadn’t started. I recognized some of the faces at the counter from my other trips to town, but I hadn’t been around enough for anyone to offer a greeting. The only friendly gesture came from a man in the booth at the far corner, waving for us to join him. I figured he was the man who wanted to talk to me. He looked familiar, fiftyish, handsome, but I couldn’t place him.

A woman sat facing him in the booth. The back of her head looked great, her light brown hair glowing all the way across the diner, growing brighter as we walked to the table. It radiated health as if it had been brushed firmly for a long time by a specialist whose only task was to make hair shine.

We were at the table and the man stood and held out his hand to me. “Ed McWilliams,” he said as we shook hands. “This is my wife, Lauren.” She looked up and gave me the slightest nod. Her face glowed. Not the same as her hair, but still a glow.

I should have recognized them. I’d been in their home and seen their pictures in almost every room. The pictures didn’t do them justice. It took seeing them in person to realize how healthy rich they looked, sporting the kind of grooming that lots of money can buy. Not just the effort and products of grooming, but money to buy the time needed if it were really going to show.

I looked at McWilliams’s hand as we shook and I thought about my father’s hands, the black cracks in his skin that never went away, and the nails, always splintered and dirty from working out in the weather, no matter the effort he put in to keep them clean.

“Please,” said McWilliams, gesturing toward the booth seat he’d just

vacated. "Sit."

I slid in. He sat down next to his wife. The seersuckers stopped at the counter and took up a pair of stools. McWilliams never looked at them.

I had shaved and showered that morning and put on a clean shirt wanting not to embarrass the commune when I went into town by looking like a cliché hippie. But now, looking at the two McWilliamses, I felt like God's own hippie. When was the last time I'd had a real haircut?

"Would you like a cup of coffee? Have you had breakfast? They have terrific muffins here."

"Um..." was all I managed to get out before the waitress arrived. I'd been in the diner before and the service wasn't bad, but it wasn't in overdrive, either. Yet even though McWilliams hadn't gestured, the waitress seemed somehow to have come in response to his desire that she be there. I wondered if he had been throwing money around from the moment he stepped in the door, or if it was only the feeling that he *might* if everyone there proved worthy.

The waitress—I was pretty sure her name was Joanie—smiled down at me as if she had just found Jesus. "What can I get for you?"

"Just coffee," I said.

"Have a muffin," said McWilliams. "Saskatoon berry. They're great."

There were no plates on the table, just the coffee cups that he and his wife were drinking from. If either had had a muffin earlier, the dishes had already been cleared. Or did he just know, even without the actual experience, that the Saskatoon berry muffins were special?

"Sure," I said. "That'll be great."

"Great," repeated the waitress, her smile getting even bigger in defiance of all the laws of nature. As she moved away from the table, I said, "I'm sorry about Edward. He was a good guy."

It was easy to say. Eddie McWilliams *was* a good guy. In fact, he was sort of a great guy. Most rich kid radicals like Eddie had cut off ties with their parents, even when their parents were liberals. Eddie's parents were very conservative (maybe ultraconservative would be more accurate) with lots of government connections and business ties to the war machine. Yet Eddie remained in touch with them, was respectful and loving. At least he was until the last days before the explosion that blew their New York City townhouse to pieces. Before that, he was intent on persuading them they had to change their ways. In retrospect, Eddie was

a saint.

I got to know him while I was avoiding the Army's request that I return to Vietnam. He was working at a draft counseling center in the Village. We had some long talks, and when I needed to disappear, he hid me in his parents' house while we worked on a strategy for getting me out of the country. Through Eddie, I got to know a lot of the Movement kids. His house was a popular hangout that summer while his parents were in Europe, where his dad was supposedly making all kinds of evil arms deals. There were lots of drugs, lots of music, lots of arguing, and lots of sex. Looking at his parents now, I realized I'd probably messed up the sheets on their bed a dozen times or more.

"He wrote us about you," said McWilliams. About me being in their bed? I wondered. "He said you were very brave and also thoughtful and responsible. Very mature for your age."

I guessed he hadn't written about the bed.

"Well, he was all of those things, too" I said. "That's for sure. It's a terrible loss."

It was. Eddie was the kind of guy who you'd want to see as president someday. Maybe that's why he was dead already. Get the really good ones out of the way early.

"You knew Roger, too, didn't you?" said McWilliams. "The one who made the bomb?"

"I met him. A couple of times." I was lying, but it seemed the right thing to do. They might stop being so nice if they knew how much time I'd really spent with Roger.

"Did you know about the bombs?" said Mrs. McWilliams. She put it as a question, but it sounded like an accusation. Like, "Of course you knew about the bombs, you lying piece of cowardly deserter shit. And I know you knew about them and you're just as guilty as Roger."

Of course, I did know about the bombs. That's why I left. I didn't want to be anywhere near a bomb or a gun (they had plenty of those there, too) or a knife or a firecracker or, for that matter, anyone raising their voice. It was my own personal Peace Movement.

I had told Eddie the bomb stuff was all crazy. And he knew it, too. But Roger was one of those Svengalis that thrive in troubled times, and he had Eddie, as well as plenty of others, under a spell. It was the romantic spell of revolution, of the good fight, of Libert ,  galit , Fraternit . We

all got dewy-eyed when we heard the words. I still get that way. But the dew in my eyes didn't keep me from looking for the door.

Eddie couldn't go. He was home. Of course, Eddie was already a believer. But he had been committed to nonviolence until Roger turned him at the end.

So I lied to Mrs. McWilliams, to Lauren. "No," I said. "I was kind of an outsider. I was looking for help, you know, some advice about what to do. I wasn't actually part of the group." A true lie. I wasn't part of the group, but I wasn't exactly an outsider.

"Really?" she said.

I suddenly wanted to know why they were here. Seeing them, the grieving parents, had disarmed me after the initial panic with the seersuckers. I was ready for trouble and then here were these clean, wealthy people and life was suddenly coffee and muffins.

"Here you go," said Joanie, serving me my coffee and muffin. "Enjoy!"

As soon as she was away from the booth, McWilliams said, "You were in the group and you spent a lot of time with Roger."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact fashion, not accusatory, not angry. Just letting me know I was an asshole with a muffin. I didn't even try to argue. So much for my sensitivity to their feelings.

"Are you in touch with him now?" he said.

"No, I don't have anything to do with him."

"But you know where he is, don't you? You know he's in Cuba."

"Sure, it's not a secret. He went there after the explosion."

"And you haven't been in touch with him since he went there?"

"Look, I did spend time with Roger and I did know about the bombs. But I was gone before they blew everything up. And I was gone because I knew he was trouble and I didn't want to be there. And now I don't want to be here."

I slid out of the booth dragging my mail bag with me. The seersuckers got up from the counter, blocking the way out. My stomach was doing flip-flops. McWilliams put his hand on my arm.

"Please sit down, Jay. We're not done."

It seemed so ridiculous. It was daytime. We were in a public place with people around. People drinking coffee and eating muffins. People reading the newspaper or their mail. People talking about fishing. But

I was in a living nightmare with two beautiful rich people who hated me for killing their son, even though I didn't do it, and two thugs who looked ready to cut me into little pieces and then kill me.

"Sit," said McWilliams. "We have an offer for you."

"An offer? What kind of offer?"

"A good offer. Please. Sit."

I slid back in the booth. The seersuckers went back to their coffee.

"What do you want from me?"

Lauren spoke. "It's very simple. We want you to go to Cuba. We want you to go there, find Roger, and kill him."

I thought I must be delirious. Maybe someone on the commune had dropped some acid in my coffee that morning and I was tripping and didn't know it. Maybe none of this was happening. I really wanted it to be that or something like that. But I'd tripped enough to know the difference between the acid world and the real world. This was real.

"He killed my son," said Lauren. "He murdered him."

"It was an accident. A terrible accident—"

"No," she said. "It was murder. He killed him on purpose. It's the truth. I know it."

I wasn't going to argue with her. I took a bite of my muffin. Good as ever. I smiled as I chewed, thinking the smile would hold them off until I could think of a way to escape. I swallowed. My mind was blank.

I heard myself say, "I have to get back to the commune. I have the mail."

Well, it's true, I thought. They'll have to let me go. The mail must go through.

I started out of the booth again and the seersuckers swiveled on their stools to face me. This time they didn't even bother to get up. They knew I wasn't through yet.

"Hear us out," said McWilliams. "It's the least you can do." No, I thought, the least I can do is curl up in a fetal position and stay that way until you leave.

"For Eddie," said Lauren.

Oh, jeez, I thought, the dead boy's mom asks you to stay, and even though she wants you to kill someone, you have to listen. *That* was the least I could do. I took another bite of the muffin.

Lauren took over the conversation now, explaining their plan. "We

want you to join the Venceremos Brigade. You know what that is, right? Americans going to Cuba to help with the sugar harvest? They're leaving for Havana next week and we can get you in. The fellow who lives next door to our place in Connecticut is quite the liberal, and if we tell him about you, the famous hero deserter wanting to go to Cuba, we are certain he can make it happen."

She went through the details with a calm but proud eagerness that made me feel like I was on the decorations committee for the Harvest Moon Ball at the country club and Lauren was in charge, and Gee, Madge, this is going to be the best ball ever!

I chewed and she talked. Roughly, it came down to this: Their neighbor in Connecticut (next door to their country house, the one that didn't get blown up like their city house) would pull some strings in the antiwar movement and throw some money around to get me into the Brigade. I'd go down to Cuba, run into Roger at some welcoming ceremony or some other place like a clubhouse where all the American exiles hung out, pick up the ties that bind, get closer and closer, and, when the right moment came, I'd kill him. They had a poison for me to slip into his coffee. It would look like he had a heart attack. No one would know I did it. And when the Brigade was finished chopping sugarcane, I'd simply come back with the others. That was it, more or less, and wasn't it a splendid plan? Madge would have been proud.

But I wasn't Madge. I had no pride.

"Um," I said.

They waited for more. I forced myself to focus.

"Um, Mrs. McWilliams, Mr. McWilliams, I liked Eddie. I liked him a lot. And I think Roger's really scum. But I can't do this."

"Why not?" she said.

"I can't just go and kill someone."

"But you've killed before," said Lauren. "You killed a lot of people. You got medals for doing it."

"That was war. And I didn't want to kill anyone then. I was trying to stay alive."

"But this will be safe. I explained it."

I realized she truly believed that it would be as simple for me to do as it was for her to describe. I wouldn't get anywhere trying to argue details with her. I looked to her husband to see if he also believed that it would

be simple or if there might be a chance of reasoning with him.

“You think it will be safe?”

“We wouldn’t ask you to do it if we didn’t think so,” he said.

He was lying. But he wasn’t going to disagree with his wife in front of me. Probably not when they were alone, either. She needed to believe that Roger could be killed. She was clinging to it and he wasn’t going to upset her with a reality check. He wanted to make her happy. Whatever happened to me was irrelevant.

“Of course,” he continued, “we’re going to make it worth your while.”

“I don’t think—”

He cut me off. “Would you like to go home, Jay? See your parents, get your life going again? I bet you would.”

And suddenly we were there, what it was all about.

“We have friends, Jay. The most powerful friends you can imagine. You could be pardoned. You could go back to the States.”

“Mr. McWilliams, I know you have a lot of friends in the government. Eddie talked a lot about that. But a pardon? I don’t think—”

He reached inside his blazer and brought out an envelope and handed it to me. I opened it and took out the letter it held. It was my pardon, signed by the president.

“Wow.”

“Wow, indeed,” said McWilliams.

“But won’t there be questions? I mean, I’m a well-known deserter.”

“A ruse to disguise your courageous undercover work tracking down subversives for your government.”

“So everyone’s gonna think I’m a rat.”

“They’ll think you’re a hero,” said Lauren.

“They? They who?” I said.

“Your father,” said McWilliams. “From what I understand he’s rather upset with you. Do this thing for us, and you can be a hero again. His hero.”

Wow, I thought. These guys are good. I suddenly thought of the book *1984*. One of the things that stuck with me from when I read it in high school was how they knew the guy’s innermost fears. He would do anything they wanted once he understood they were inside his head.

“We never got to say goodbye to Eddie,” said Lauren, her voice beginning to rise. She couldn’t hold it back any longer. Her face became

distorted and tears filled her eyes. "I never got to say goodbye to my boy!"

She made a horrible sobbing cry and tried to stand, shoving the table up against me as she jerked upwards. McWilliams got his arms around her and kept her in place. The people in the diner turned to look. The seersuckers stood up and everyone went back to their own business. The seersuckers sat.

Lauren sobbed and McWilliams patted her shoulder.

"I know, darling. I know."

I didn't know what to do. The table had me trapped in my seat, but I didn't want to push it back while she was crying. After a minute, she got control of herself.

"We need you, Jay," said McWilliams.

"I have to think."

I was just stalling and I knew it and they knew it. They had played me just right.

McWilliams reached out for the pardon. I held onto it for a moment, then let him take it from my hands. It wasn't as if the seersuckers were going to let me leave with it. He tucked it back inside his blazer. His hand came back out holding a business card. There was nothing on it but a phone number.

"Call us," he said.

We were done. McWilliams slid out of the booth and stepped back to make room for Mrs. McWilliams, who slid out right behind him.

She looked down at me as she stood. "Call us soon."

They walked to the door. The seersuckers got up and walked out behind them. As he left, Tall One flashed me the peace sign, then turned his hand down, pointing his index finger and snapping his thumb down like the hammer of a gun. I heard the Lincoln start up and drive away.