

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAVID ROUNDED THE CORNER OF SIXTH AND HENNEPIN STREAMING with sweat. Traffic crawled, horns honked. Drivers cursed. Even in the gloaming, the July heat was oppressive, a humid pall smothering the city—the *country*—like a plastic bag pulled tight around its neck. As did everywhere else, Minneapolis simmered, the conflagration of Martin Luther King’s assassination in April having given rise to the tense grief of Bobby Kennedy’s murder in June.

Moby Dick’s—where Jackie had insisted their reunion take place—was in the middle of the block, next to a flophouse called the Rand Hotel. A smiling white cetacean on a blue sign over the entrance promised patrons A Whale of a Drink. Across the street, the Gopher Theater advertised its latest movie on a sidewalk marquee, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The inside smelled of mold and tobacco and wasn’t much to look at: a long bar with red leather stools, a single pool table in back, an unvarnished wooden floor. Tendrils of smoke clung to the ceiling.

David felt out of place, his collared shirt and too-new Levis at odds with the crowd’s hip dishevelment. He ordered a Pabst from a gargantuan bartender with tattooed arms and a ginger-colored beard and sat down at the bar to wait for Jackie while the jukebox played “Itchycoo Park.”

That he was drinking beer and listening to rock and roll

instead of spending the last few months of his enlistment at a cramped stateside billet had been Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's doing. McNamara had denied a request to increase the Marine Corps' size, but with compulsory combat time limited to thirteen months, the Corps was dependent on new recruits (rather than repeat tours of duty) to maintain troop levels in Vietnam. His ruling had forced the Corps to adopt an early release program in order to avoid exceeding its authorized numerical strength.

After being discharged, he had retrieved his furniture from storage, leased an apartment near Stadium Village, bought a '63 Buick Skylark, and got his old job back at the roofing company. Only after registering to enroll in school in the fall did he go looking for Jackie. He showed up at her home in Robbinsdale the last week in June, hoping to surprise her.

She lived in a snug two-story made of English brick, with an assortment of conifers strewn about the front yard and a flag draped over the threshold in anticipation of the Fourth. A genial man with neat blond hair and eyes an even deeper blue than Jackie's answered his rap on the door.

"Are you the David from Vietnam?" Pete Lundquist asked, after they exchanged introductions.

"Yes, sir. I was discharged this month."

Lundquist slapped him on the shoulder and grinned. "I can't tell you how proud of you I am. Young men like you give me hope our country hasn't lost its mettle."

He looked away to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. It was the first time since returning home anyone had acknowledged his service to his country, the first time his short hair and reflexive use of the appellation 'sir' had elicited something other than unease—or outright hostility. He pulled himself together and stammered something about it having been a privilege.

Jackie was living in Dinkytown, her father said, with a room-

mate named Liz Bodine. He left with her phone number and a standing invitation from Pete Lundquist to drop by anytime for dinner and a strong drink. He had called Jackie the following day, so here he was, sitting in a downtown dive with his heart in his throat, hoping to pick up where they had left off.

“Hello, David,” a voice beside him said. A psychedelic rendering of Jackie stood before him, wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt knotted above the naval and bell-bottom jeans with fringed cuffs. Her hair hung wild, a gilded mat tumbling over her shoulders. A peace symbol dangled from a leather thong looped around her neck, and a slightly wanton look graced her face. It was a look he had never gotten over, a look that for nearly two years was all he had thought about.

The sight of her left him in smithereens, all hope of self-control and hiding his emotions gone. He scrambled to his feet and knocked over his Pabst, sending a rivulet of beer halfway down the bar. She giggled and reached for a napkin while he apologized to a threesome of longhairs in the splash zone. The one closest to him, a squat redhead with a Fu Manchu, gave him a contemptuous look and failed to acknowledge his apology.

“I said I’m sorry,” David challenged.

One of Fu Manchu’s buddies intervened, a slender blond in granny glasses and a leather vest. “It’s cool, man, it’s cool,” he said. “Accidents happen.”

He gave a curt nod and turned to Jackie, his face on fire with embarrassment.

“Is it safe to sit next to you,” she asked with a coy smile, “or are you going to give me a beer bath, too?”

What he wanted to give her was a hard time about failing to answer his letters until Khe Sanh, but spilling his beer had put him on his heels. He shrugged and ordered two Singapore Slings while she climbed onto the stool next to him. “It meant a lot to hear from you,” he told her. The words came out with more feeling than he intended.

“I guess I finally got over being jilted for the Marines,” she replied, holding his gaze. “I’m sorry for what I said that day at the teach-in. You know I didn’t mean it.” A look of remorse clouded her face, then was gone.

“I forgave you the minute you said it.”

Her eyes moistened and she took a gulp of her drink, as if steeling herself against their past—a past that had given him hope when hope was in short supply. “You need to know right up front that I’m still against the war.” Her expression hardened. “Now more than ever. Some of the things I’ve done in the name of peace would probably appall you.”

“Some of the things I’ve done would appall you, too,” he said, softly. “Why don’t you go first?”

He got pleasantly hammered while she reconstructed the last twenty-one months of her life. He learned that she was on track to graduate the following spring with a Humanities degree: “I wanted to major in something relevant, not waste my education acquiring capitalist skills like my father. Can you imagine devoting your life to real estate? I mean, my God, how shallow!” That she regarded the use of hallucinogenic drugs as a sacred obligation: “Mind expansion is humanity’s best hope for avoiding annihilation.” And that the rioting in black ghettos—only sportscasters called them Negroes anymore, she told him—was a welcome sign of racial awakening: “Like Baldwin said, ‘God gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more water, the fire next time!’” She admitted to having joined Students for a Democratic Society, and proudly recited the contents of a pamphlet she had helped craft in support of a student strike on campus the previous April. “It is time for us to attack the cancer that plagues our society. Too many martyrs are dying in the streets of our cities and in the jungles of Vietnam.”

“What ‘cancer’ are you referring to?” he asked, struggling mightily to ignore the line about gook martyrs.

She seemed astonished he didn’t know. “Why, white American

hegemony. The System. It's what's driving all the anger. Did you know there were more than seventy campus protests the first two months of this academic year alone? People want change and they're running out of patience. I can't *wait* for the Democratic Convention in Chicago next month. You ain't seen nothin', yet," she added, in an odd patois that defied classification.

He swilled the rest of his drink and let the gin take him. The girl he loved appeared to have become a radical, but he didn't care. The taut, bisque skin of her midriff made his balls tingle. He had waited eighteen months to be cured of pussy fever, and he wasn't about to let her daffodil political views get in the way. He flashed a drunken, helpless smile, as if the recondite things she spoke of were too much for him to comprehend. "What I really want to know," he asked, "is whether your mind has expanded enough to date a marine?"

She set her drink down and folded her hands. "That's why I agreed to see you when you called. I wanted to tell you face to face. I'm in a pretty heavy relationship with Kyle Levy."

David felt like he'd been skinned alive, flensed in a place called Moby Dick's. *Chances are, she's already bangin' either your best friend or your worst enemy, depending on which she thinks'll hurt the most.* Westbrook had that right.

"I'd sooner have a Punji stick rammed up my ass than think of you with him." His voiced thickened. "You know, those sharp stakes the Viet Cong smear with feces and try to impale us on? Those 'martyrs' in your fucking pamphlet?"

A song he had never heard before began to play, Eric Burden singing a cappella. The crowd cheered in recognition and broke out the usual slogans.

"War is not the answer! Peace now!"

The lyrics and liquor transported him to the morning the Ghost Patrol had marched to eternal grace. He stood and scanned the bar, his breath coming in ragged gulps. The song played on.

“Damn right they’ll die!” Fu Manchu shouted above the music in his direction. “If it takes mothers losing their sons to stop it, the more the better!”

David grabbed a beer bottle and swung it backhand at Fu Manchu’s head. His mouth burst open like a ripe tomato, making a bloody jack-o’-lantern of his face. His friends stepped in to defend him, but all they managed to do was rip David’s shirt off his back and divert his fury to them. He drove one headlong into the bar and turned to confront the other, the blond in granny glasses. David broke his nose with a chopping right hand. “Maybe tonight *your* mother will be the one to cry,” he growled into the boy’s busted face.

The Paul Bunyan of a bartender ended things by thumping him on the back of the neck with a blackjack and pitching him out the door. He tumbled onto the sidewalk and skidded to a stop near the curb. Barhoppers and theatergoers sidestepped him and shook their heads in disgust, taking him for a drunk being given the bum’s rush for brawling—which was exactly what he was.

“You’re an animal!” Jackie screamed in his face before walking away. “A fucking animal! They should never have let you out of the Marine Corps!”

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Jackie made it back to her apartment by eleven. Liz and her boyfriend Kevin, a pudgy, curly haired jokester with a nagging squint, were snuggled on a sofa bed in the living room, watching Johnny Carson on a small color television. An overstuffed armchair sat in one corner of the room, a bookcase filled with textbooks and novels in another. Martin Luther King, Janis Joplin, and Bobby Kennedy gazed down from posters on the wall, avatars of their incandescent streak in time.

“I hope you enjoy all the time you’ll be spending in the kitchen,” she said, before sticking her tongue out at Liz.

“I bet her a week of washing dishes that David the marine would end up sleeping here tonight,” Liz explained to Kevin, shaking her head. “I can’t believe I was wrong. She never wears that top without getting laid.” Liz had long straight hair, tiny corms of breast, and a sparse, lithesome frame. Where Kevin was witty and hyperkinetic, she was understated and serious, antipodal of him in every detail.

“Maybe showing her stomach was supposed to make him suffer,” Kevin offered. “You know, like in *Lysistrata*?”

Liz gave a short, piercing laugh completely incongruous with her languid personality. “Girls say ‘no’ to boys who say ‘yes’ to war, something like that?”

Jackie walked over and turned off the television. “The night was a disaster. A total freakin’ disaster. I need to get high. Put some music on.”

Kevin rolled off the sofa and riffled through a stack of albums leaning against the stereo while Liz switched on a pair of lava lamps. Jackie went into the kitchen, where a mobile of a brilliant green parrot swayed over the table. She retrieved a bag of pot from its hiding place inside a bowl of potpourri and returned to the living room. Kevin loaded Cream’s *Disraeli Gears* onto the turntable while she sat cross-legged on the floor with Liz and rolled joints, like sisters baking bread.

A wave of peace descended over her after the first few lung-searing hits. She stared at an aquamarine globule of wax rising inside the nearest lava lamp and said, “He actually got *thrown out* of Moby’s for fighting. Can you believe it? It was disgusting.”

“What did you expect?” Kevin chided. “He’s a trained killer.”

She related the circumstances of David’s wig-out with “Sunshine of Your Love” playing on the stereo. Afterwards, the three of them traded tokes and debated the cause of his savagery for close to an hour, filling the room with a pungent haze. Kevin contended that hearing “Sky Pilot” had triggered a flashback to

Vietnam; Liz maintained he went berserk because he found out Jackie was balling Kyle Levy. Jackie suspected a little of each, but whatever the reason, she wanted no part of it. She *had* a boyfriend.

Kyle was an enlightened visionary fighting to change the world. David was a brute forever warped by Vietnam. She and Kyle saw the world exactly the same. She and David were opposites with nothing in common.

At a sign from Liz that it was time to get lost, she said she was tired and headed for the bedroom, as it was Liz's month to sleep on the foldout. She brushed through the curtain of gold beads that had replaced their bedroom door and paused to consider the woven orb of willow and twine that was suspended over her bed. The Ojibwa called it a dream-catcher; it caught bad dreams and let the good ones in. Come morning, it would be chock-full after the night she had.

She changed into a summer nightie and walked over to her dresser. A tapestry with a black butterfly superimposed on concentric circles of orange and green covered the wall behind it. She scrounged around inside the top drawer of the dresser for a Quaalude—the Whore Pill, Kyle called it, on account of its reputation as an aphrodisiac.

Deservedly so, she thought half an hour later, her hand between her legs. She rubbed faster, turned on by Liz's moans in the next room. A jumble of lubricious fantasy danced across her mind, but as she fingered herself over the edge, a single, unbidden image swept away all else: that of David at Moby Dick's, his naked torso beaded with sweat, like a marble sculpture in the mist, his muscles rippled yet smooth, straining to defend the honor of his fallen comrades.

It made her gasp.