

Days before leaving for Vietnam, Angus witnesses a Mafia killing and mistakenly receives a man's last confession identifying the murderers. Angus must lead investigators and a reporter to solve the case without revealing the UNSOLICITED CONFESSION.

Un-Solicited Confession

By Gene Gerber

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CHAPTER 1

Angus McKay was happy that his girlfriend, Mary Beth Mason, said she'd wait for him until he got back from Vietnam. He was driving from her home in Matagorda back to his home in Crockett. He had felt that he needed to tell Mary Beth personally that he had gotten his assignment and was heading for Vietnam for the next two years. He felt more like a big brother to her than a boyfriend.

Angus had left Crockett in time to visit Mary Beth when she got off work at her father's boat and guide store on O'Connor Bay. They had dinner at the Spoonbill restaurant. Mary Beth would be a sophomore at Tulane University. They generally met at the Future Farmers of America meetings. She was impressed with Angus for being a state officer and having won the Grand Champion award. He let her hold his Aggie ring until he returned from Vietnam. They had watched a late movie that ended at midnight. The TV station played the Stars Spangled Banner and went off the air until the next morning.

Angus started his 225-mile drive home as a thunder storm blew in from the Gulf of Mexico. The young couple had missed the weather report that had forecasted gusty winds up to 50 miles per hour and heavy rains to hit the coastal area around midnight. Angus had to turn on his windshield wipers at Wallis near highway 60 intersection and state highway 1093. He was driving toward Caldwell where he would take highway 21 all the way to Crockett. The winds and pouring rains began to increase. He noticed there were no cars on the road as the sky darkened and the torrential rains intensified. The visibility and wind made it difficult for him to keep the car in a straight line. Whipping winds were pounding road debris against his car. He was leaning forward and straining to see the yellow stripe

dividing the road on the two-lane road. News on the car radio claimed that a tornado had touched down between Conroe and Montgomery. The rapid swish, swish of the windshield wipers didn't do his headache any good. The storm was producing winds and rains that came down in sheets – heavy then light; heavy then light.

Lightning bolts and thunder continually filled the night sky. His headlights were dulled by the darkness due to the low dark cloud level and heavy down pour. He could barely see the trees doing their rain dance swirling and bending with the rhythm of the rain. As the storm got closer, the crackling noise of the lightning bolts and the sound of the rumbling thunder became louder ending in a crescendo

Angus knew he would be stopping for some coffee and aspirin at his usual stopping place on the outside of Bryan, the all-night Corner Store. Over the years Angus had stopped there nearly every time he drove from Texas A&M University to the Bar MK in Crockett.

The bored clerk looked up from reading the Houston Morning News. His big smile showed his happiness that a customer, whom he recognized, was running from the car that still had the head lights on and the windshield wipers rapidly swishing back and forth.

“Up late or is it up early, Mr. Angus?” he warmly greeted. “Havn’t seen you since your graduation. What's you need?”

“Just a cup of joe and some aspirins, Ira! Must be my sinus either that or allergies. It's that time of the year when the pollen count seems to be at its worst,” Angus replied as he blew his nose.

“Bad storm to be out in this morn, huh, Mr. Angus. Aspirins are on the next aisle,” he pointed to an aisle, “They’re over there. Maybe you should try one of them new allergy pills. They claim the pills will dry up your nose. You’ll find ‘em next to your aspirins.”

“Think I will. Thanks for the medical advice. I’ll give both a try, maybe one or the other will help me get some relief,” Angus yawned as he approached the counter.

Ira punched some keys on the cash registrar and said, “Sir, that’ll be \$5.75. Good lookin’ black sweatshirt you wearing there, Mr. Angus. I like that scarf. Here’s your twenty-five cents change,”

“Thanks, it’s a Tulane sweatshirt and scarf that my girl friend gave me for Christmas. It’s supposed to make me look more collegiate. I like it, it’s warm ,” he replied looking at his reflection in the big round mirror above the cash register. Angus had typical Irish features of strawberry blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. He was wearing black slacks, a white shirt with its collar sticking out from under the black sweatshirt and a scarf draped over his shoulder.

As he was leaving, a white car sped past by. “Boy, he’s in a hurry!” Angus yelled back to Ira with the wind and rain slapping him in the face. Suddenly, a black Lincoln raced by. “It had to be going 80-85 miles per hour, maybe more,” he thought to himself as he backed up, turned, and headed toward Crockett. That is when he thought he heard multiple gun shots cracking ahead. He rolled down the car window to listen to the shots more clearly. Several more rounds were rattled off. “Man, that sounds like an AK-47 that I fired last year at the Corps six-week training camp,” he whistled as he hurriedly rolled up the car window.

As he came to the crest of a knoll, he saw sparks flying off the white car. Bullet holes were scattered across the back of the car. It began swerving from one side of the road to the other. Then it ran off the highway just past a road side picnic area plowing head-on into a tree.

The black Lincoln slowed down; more rounds peppered the car as white smoke from the smashed radiator began rising skyward. The Lincoln’s brake lights lit up as it slowed down until it nearly came to a complete stop, Sparks bounced off the white automobile, shattering the rear window so that half of it fell inside on the driver’s side.

The driver of the Lincoln stomped down on the accelerator for more speed, causing the tires to slip and slide sideways. The car

squatted as the tires gripped the wet pavement and quickly straightened out. A lightning bolt ripped across the black sky. The lightning up the road allowed Angus to see black fumes as the Lincoln disappeared in the pouring rain.

Angus slowed down and turned into the picnic parking area. He pushed the button to turn on his emergency flashers. Then he decided to park his car so it was facing the wreckage wrapped around the tree and hit his bright lights. He jumped out of his car and ran toward the smoldering car. The motionless driver was slumped over the steering wheel. The back window and front windshield looked as though they were covered with spider webs with bullet holes in the center and lines zigzagging across them. Bullet holes were scattered across the trunk.

Flames began flaring up around the open trunk providing extra light to the headlights in the darkness. Pulling up on the door handle Angus had to yank several times with all his strength. It took several more attempts he finally got it opened wide enough for him to reach in and grab the victim. The heavy odor of cigarette smoke mingled with the black smoke from the smoldering plastic seat covers and began to fill the inside of the car. The smoke burned Angus' eyes and throat; he turned around to breathe fresh air. He felt the heat as flames began to engulf the back of the car. Grabbing an arm and shoulder, he tried pulling the victim out of the car, but the driver's left leg was squeezed between his right leg and the steering wheel.

Angus took the scarf that Mary Beth had given him for Christmas, and wrapped it under the man's arm pits. He was able to free the man from the burning wreckage. The man's weight and soaked clothes made it difficult for Angus to tug and pull him toward a tall pine tree about 20 yards away. The area under the evergreen tree sheltered them from the wind and rain. The temperature dipped farther making the air colder so that Angus felt like he was in a meat locker.

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Angus was surprised to find a faint pulse. The victim was bleeding where a bullet or piece of metal from the automobile had torn a big chunk of muscle and bone from his neck including the shoulder area. Blood spurted with each heartbeat. Angus' black Tulane sweatshirt and the driver's jacket were splatted with blood. Angus unwrapped the scarf under the man's arms and wrapped it around his hand and began applying direct pressure as he had been taught in the Corps summer training program.

Suddenly the man's eyes opened wide showing enlarged pupils. He gagged on the blood and saliva that filled his throat and mouth. Using the victim's jacket sleeve Angus wiped the fluids from the man's mouth. The two stared at each other for a long period of time. The man blinked and with a weak whisper murmured, "*Forgive me Father for I have sinned.*" Angus was stunned, he could only mutter, "It's OK." The man, never stopped, "*It's been many years, too long, since my last confession. I'm truly sorry for all the sinful crimes I've committed. But I just couldn't shoot those kids. (cough, gag) mafia...trying to kill me. I shot the commissioner and his wife,*" he admitted as he coughed and gagged on more bloody phlegm, "*...had...contract to kill his whole family...couldn't pull the trigger, even after...kids saw me. They screamed.*" The man gagged and struggled for a breath of air. "*I ran.*" He stopped to let Angus clean the bloody mucus from his chin and throat. "*That's wh- (cough, cough)...mafia put a hit on me.*" His words grew weaker as he choked on more mucus, "*commissioner...figured out (his coughs were coming harder and deeper) "the school bus scheme."*"

Angus remained silent and continued applying pressure to the wound. The scarf was now completely soaked and blood dripped to the ground. The wreckage was smoldering from the hood to the trunk.

The man lying in his arms, took a couple of deep, hard breaths and with blank eyes ended with, "Tell Maria, I love her." His whole body suddenly began to shake violently and, then went limb. Lifeless

eyes stared into eyes of Angus, who realized at that moment the man had taken his last breath.

Angus shut his eyes and with a trembling voice prayed, "*Lord you gave forgiveness to the thief who died with you on the cross. If it be your will, forgive this man who turned to you in his darkest hour.*" Angus kept the pressure on the wound.

The sound of a car door slamming frightened Angus. "Was it the black Lincoln?" he thought to himself. Angus twisted his body around and saw a police car with its red flashing light next to his car. "Sir, you alright?" A voice called from the darkness. The flames from the wreckage had died down and the headlights on Angus' car had begun to dim.

"Yes, I am OK, just soaked and cold to the bones," Angus responded his teeth chattering.

"Give me a minute and I'll be right there. I'm fix'n' to get you a blanket from the trunk," the police officer stated as he opened the back of his station wagon and grabbed a blanket and a towel. He approached the scene.

"How's he doing?" he nodded toward the man lying beside Angus as he handed Angus a blanket.

"Took his last breath several minutes ago," replied Angus still applying pressure.

"Let's take a look," the officer bent down to check for a pulse. "Yep, no pulse. Cold skin." He gently pushed the victim's eyes lids downward. He walked over and slowly removed Angus' hand from the victim's body.

"It's OK, son. You did the best you could," the police officer assured Angus. He began to wipe blood off Angus' hands with a towel that he had brought from his squad car.

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“So, what in tarnation happened here?” the police officer asked as he took the blanket from Angus’ hand and wrapped it over his shoulders. “By the way, I am officer, Jack White, from the Bryan Police Department and, “You are...?”

“My name is Angus McKay. As I was leaving The Corner Store, I saw two cars zooming up the road.

When I pulled onto the highway, I heard shots. I thought it sounded a lot like the sound of an AK-47,” Angus replied.

“An AK-47! How is it you come to recognize it was an AK-47?”

“I got to fire one at a Corps six-week training camp last summer. I graduated this year and have my orders to report to Fort Polk in a few days for Vietnam training. I was saying good bye to my girlfriend,” McKay explained.

“OK, Mr. McKay. So, how is it that this fellow ended up bulldozing that tree?” asked Officer White.

“Well sir, a black Lincoln was firing at this guy's car. Bullets hit his car. He swerved off the road. The Lincoln fired more rounds and it sped away. I didn't think I could get close enough to get a license number, so, I pulled into the picnic parking area. I dragged him from his burning care over here. The rain must have brought him around from being unconscious. I've been applying pressure to his wound since then,” Angus took a couple of quick breaths and continued,” He's lost a lot of blood. You'll probably find more wounds.”

The officer asked, “Did he ever say anything?”

“Yes, but it was hard to understand him with the thunder, the wind, and the rain. All I could understand was he asked me to tell Maria he loved her and that he was sorry. At least, that's what I could make out. He had a very difficult time with his words. Mostly gasping for air in between clearing his throat,” replied Angus.

“McKay, I am going back to my squad car and call for an ambulance for this guy, and a tow truck for this fellow’s car. Your headlights look like they could use a charge. We can do that while we wait for them. I will need to see your driver's license when I get back,” the officer stated as pulled the blanket over Angus's head. “You got something to drink in your car?” he asked heading back to his car.

“Coffee, probably not so hot by now,” replied Angus.

Finally, a couple of cars stopped to render aid, but Officer White waved them on. When he returned, he had a plastic cover for the victim. “Dang it! I helped my grandson with his model airplane last night and got glue on my fingers that didn’t scrub off. Sure makes it difficult to unfold this plastic sheet,” he complained handing Angus a cup of hot coffee.

“Here, have some coffee. How long have you been sitting under this tree?” he asked as he covered victim’s body with the plastic.

“Can't really say. I left The Corner Store a little before 3 a.m. What time is it now?”

“It's quarter after 4. Did anyone else stop to help?”

“No sir. Just those two that stopped a few minutes ago. Maybe no one wanted to drive through the storm. Cannot say I blame them. It was tough driving up Highway 36, especially around Sealy. It was a real Texas gully washer!” explained Angus.

Officer White pulled out a pad and pencil as he checked Angus’ driver’s license. “Says here, your name is Andrew Daniel McKay? Is that correct?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. My friends call me Angus.”

“You live on Rural Route #4, Crockett TX. Is this your correct address?” Officer White continued.”

“Yes, sir. But, I’m to report at Fort Polk June 19th.”

“The ambulance and tow truck should be here within 30 minutes. Before they arrive, is there anything more you can tell me about what you witnessed?” Officer White asked.

“Can't add too much to it. When I heard the shots, I did slow down because I did not want to get involved with any shooting. I am not certain it was an AK-47, all I saw were sparks when the bullets hit this guy's car. Then, it turned sharply left, ran off the road and crashed into that tree,” he explained pointing in the direction of the tree and the charred car. Angus continued, “The Lincoln slowed down and fired off more rounds before disappearing from my sight. At first, I was scared they might backtrack and take shots at me. But then I felt this fellow could use some help. Been applying pressure all the time until you came.”

“Are you warm enough in that blanket?” asked Officer White. Then he added, “Reckon I need to find out who this fella is.”

Removing the plastic sheet and rolling the body over, the police officer fished the wallet from the man’s hip pocket. He shined his flashlight on the victim’s license and then on his face, “Holy shit! This is Joey King! He's a 'member of the Houston Mafia. He has been in and out of jail lots of times. The Houston Police and probably the FBI will be interested in talking to you, Mr. McKay.”

White's tone of voice changed into man giving fatherly advice, “Son, you need to be very careful what you say, how you say it and who you say it to, ya hear me? This is gonna make front page news. I know you didn't have nuthin’ to do with his death, but be aware of the Houston Mafia. They got contacts all over, in local newspapers, even some police men are on their payroll. I gotta get this information to them as soon as I can. You can expect a call from them. I need your telephone number for my report. How many telephones do you have?”

“Let's see, kitchen and the living room. Oh, ye'ah dad's got one in the barn. There's three.” he replied. Then Angus added, “Officer White, I'm to report to Fort Polk in a few days. Is all this going to hinder my getting to Fort Polk?” Angus was desperate to know.

Officer White thought a bit and slowly responded, “Tell you what I'll try to do. In my report I'll suggest they wait 'til after 11 A.M. to allow you to get some sleep yet today. That's the best I can do,” he looked at Angus and laid the sheet back over the corpse.

“Son,” he began, “this can be a real dangerous situation. “This guy is a bad hombre. He is, er, was part of the Houston Mafia. I don't know if you fully understand it or not, but you can bet your britches they will be interested in knowing what you heard. Surely, they know someone stopped right after Joey crashed his car. You can expect 'em to eaves-drop on your phones... home, barn, your friends, neighbors, anyone they can think of who you may confide in. Remember, be aware who you talk to and what you say. Do you have a security system at your home?”

”Only yard lights near the barn,” he replied. White's warning words made sense. He had to protect his mom, his dad, and uncle Rory!

They could see flashing lights from the ambulance and the tow truck that was following right behind. “Looks like they're here. McKay go home, get yourself some sleep. I'll have to call this into the Houston Police. First, let's make sure your car starts,” White said.

After the two batteries were hooked up, Angus's car started up after a couple of minutes of charging. Officer White called the Houston Police from his car to report the news. A few minutes later he got a call. He said, “Yes sir!” to the person on the other side of the line.

“Whoa, hold your horses,” he yelled to the tow truck driver, “STOP! The Houston police called the FBI, who want us to leave everything as is. Their instructions are to tape this area off. Walking

over to the ambulance crew, just as they were loading Mr. King's body in to their vehicle, he forewarned them, "You ain't gonna like this, but the FBI wants you to deliver the body to the Harris county morgue right away. Sorry we disturbed your sleep," he apologized to both crews.

"Are we authorized to do that?" the frustrated driver asked.

"According to the FBI you are not only authorized but required to do so." White replied, "This guy is on their list. I'll explain everything to your office. You are to leave here now and not stop any place on the way."

The two vehicles drove away; one headed back to Bryan, the other to Houston. Officer White got back in his car and poured the last of his warm coffee. "It'll be a while before they get up here from Houston," he thought to himself.

The sun was peeking over the horizon when Angus pulled into driveway of the ranch. Based on Officer White's warning about the mafia, he looked around to see if anyone was following him. He could not see any cars from the north, nor from the south. Besides he was too tired and his body ached. He questioned if his mind would allow him to sleep.

Mom and dad were up having breakfast, they were startled to see Angus come in with blood-soaked clothes. He had to explain everything to them about witnessing a mafia hit and stopping to offer first aid to the victim. They were concerned about him being an innocent bystander. Grace, his mother, told him to get out of those bloody clothes and take a long hot shower and she'd have breakfast for him. He stripped off his bloody, wet clothes and headed for the shower where he spent extra time letting the hot water soothe his body. During breakfast he informed his parents that the FBI may stop to talk to him about the mafia hit. Then he went to his bedroom. It was not a sound sleep. The events of the day caused him to have a weird dream. In the dream he was the one involved in the accident

and the mafia were after him because they thought he had information. But he did not know anything.

“Angus, wake up. There are two men from the FBI here to talk to you,” his mother called down the hallway. He hurriedly got up, put on a robe, and walked into the living room. There were two men having coffee and talking to his father and mother.

“Mr. McKay, FBI! Good morning,” the agents stood up and introduced themselves. “Is it OK to call you Angus?” one of the agents asked. “We need to discuss what you witnessed and heard last night or should I say earlier today? We’re with the FBI in Houston. My name is Al Ramos and this is my partner Bill Williams. We’ve been talking to your parents and your mother has already given us the clothes you had on at the time of the accident. We know you had nothing to do with the accident, in fact, you were a good citizen for stopping to render aid.”

“Well, gentlemen, I told Officer White all that I heard from Mr. King. He wanted me to tell his wife that he loved her.” Angus began and then continued, “The thunderstorm prevented me from really hearing him and I guess I was too focused on his wound to pay attention to everything he was saying.”

“As we told your parents our department has been looking for Joey King for several months,” Officer Ramos explained. “Did he mention anything to you in his dying moments,” Agent Ramos said, “We’d like to hear about it.” The agent pressed on for any information the two agents could take back to their office.

Angus stated, “By the time I pulled him out of his car and dragged him 20 feet, Mr. King had only made groaning noises. We looked at each other for several moments. That was tense moment for me. I think he knew he was dying.”

“We’re sure it was a terrible moment for you. Did he mention anyone’s name of previous killings? Did he say who was after him?” questioned Agent Ramos.

“No sir. He was gagging and coughing too much to hear anything. The storm had pretty much passed when he asked that I tell Maria that he loved her,” concluded Angus.

“Angus, we have reason to believe he had something to do with the murder of a County Commissioner and his wife several days ago.

Angus looked at each agent and said, “I wish I could be of more help for you, but that’s the only thing I heard. As I told Officer White, I made a choice to try to help save the victim, rather than follow the Lincoln. Regrettably I was not successful at saving Joey’s life. He had lost too much blood from a shoulder-neck wound. The only thing I was able to understand from his garbling and gasping for air was that he loved his wife and asked me to tell her that he loved her. He had a lot of fluids flowing out of his throat. But between the rain and thunder I just was not able to make out any specific words other than about his wife. Mostly he was grasping for air and clearing his throat of blood and other liquids. That’s all I was able to understand. I did not know he was a member of the Houston Mafia. Do you have any further questions for me?” he asked, looking each agent in the eye.

“Just a couple. We want to know if you had any difficulty getting him out of the car. Was he conscious or not?”

“Yes, he’d been wedged under the steering wheel and it took several minutes to free him from the car. There was blood on the windshield so I figured his head had hit it. I dragged him maybe 20 feet to a tree to get out of the freezing rain. Both of us were soaked by the time I got him under the tree. That’s when I saw his shoulder-neck wound and saw blood squirting out. I knew direct pressure was needed to stop the blood flow. I think the rain caused him to become conscious. That’s when he began mumbling and gagging about Maria. Then he died. Later Officer White arrived and wrapped a blanket on my shoulders and covered Joey after checking his identification. Sorry I just don’t have any more details. I will say it was an intense experience for me,” Angus concluded.

“I am sure it was,” Agent Ramos agreed, “If there is anything else that comes to you later, here is my card and Agent Williams will give you his contact information. Please call us before you talk to anyone else about this case. Your mother has given us the clothes you were wearing at the time. Should something come to mind that you think would help us in our investigation, call us. I noticed your sweatshirt had Tulane U. on it. Did you go to Tulane University?”

“No sir, that was a gift from my friend. She’s a sophomore there,” Angus replied then added, “I told her yesterday that I would be in Vietnam for at least two years.”

“Yes, your parents discussed that with us. Thank you for your service and good luck over there,” Agent Williams offered his hand to shake Angus’ hand.

After the FBI left Connor and Grace discussed the situation with Angus. They told him that since he was not involved with the shooting and he did the right thing by stopping to render first aid he should go on with his plans to go to Fort Polk. Connor, who had fought in World War II, had empathy for Angus. “Son, I know what you’re going through right now. The experience of being with a dying man is tough. Just remember you must live your life. The less baggage you carry with you during your lifetime will help you eventually,” his dad said trying to comfort him.

Three days later a reporter from the Houston Morning News called to make an appointment for an interview with Angus about the accident just north of Bryan. Angus suggested they meet at the White Bear restaurant in Crockett the next day. He chose that restaurant because it is a longtime supporter the Future Farmers of America. In fact, among the many FFA photo’s on the walls, there was one with him and EZ Boy with the Grand Champion Ribbon.

“By the way, my name is Johnnie Porter. I will meet you for lunch tomorrow at 11:30 at the White Bear restaurant,” Johnnie said as he confirmed the interview with Angus.

The next day, Angus parked his pickup in front of the White Bear restaurant at 11:20. Mr. Porter walked through the door at 11:45. He had a camera that belonged to the Houston Morning News hanging around his neck.

“You must be Johnnie Porter,” Angus said walking over to meet him.

“Yes, and you must be Angus McKay,” Johnnie replied holding out his hand for a handshake. They took a table toward the back where there would be less noise from the others in the restaurant and near the photo of Angus and EZ Boy.

A young waiter quickly approached them with water. Both ordered the luncheon special of the day and sweet tea.

“Mr. McKay you must have be a brave man to have stopped to render first aid to a mafia man,” Johnnie began.

“It had nothing to do with bravery. I did not know Mr. King was a member of the Houston Mafia. All I knew was that there was a man trapped inside a wrecked burning car. I got him out and noticed he had been shot in the neck area. I applied pressure to the wound, but he had lost too much blood. He asked me to tell his wife he loved her,” responded Angus.

“How long did he bleed? Were there other wounds on his body?” the reporter fired off multi questions.

“It was probably an hour or more. It took some time to get him out of his car. Later, I learned from the police officer that he had three or four bullet wounds,” noted Angus as Johnnie pressed on with more questions.

The waiter brought their orders and more sweet tea. In between bites Johnnie continued with his questioning. “Who, err from whom, did you hear that?” Johnnie asked correcting his English.

“The police officer Jack White. He was the only other person on the road at that time. That was when the severe thunder storm came through the area. Smart people were not on highway 21 at that time. Officer White was the one who told me the victim was Joey King.” Angus stated as he took a sip of the sweet tea.

“So, you were applying pressure for nearly two hours and the only thing you heard Mr. King say was to tell his wife he loved her? Is that correct?” Mr. Porter continued inquisitively.

“Yes! That is correct. He had been shot before the car smashed into a tree. Remember, Mr. Porter, the thunder and pouring down rain made it difficult to hear anything. Besides he was going in and out of consciousness and struggling to breathe. I never did fully understand his wife’s name. Mr. Porter, don’t try to make a story about me saving nor failing to save Mr. King’s life. I did the best I could under the circumstances,” countered Angus.

“I understand Mr. McKay, or should I say Lieutenant McKay? Just a few more questions. Did you get the license plate number of the automobile that shooting at Joey?” Porter kept on questioning while taking bites of his lunch and looking at his notes.

“No, I was too far behind that car, besides the storm was limiting eye sight to just a few yards ahead. All I saw was a black automobile firing at Mr. King’s car. His car was peppered with bullet holes that, I believe came from a semi-automatic rifle. I would think, Mr. Porter, you need to find the answer to ‘why’ the commissioner was murdered. And, with that I cannot help you.” Angus asserted, letting the reporter know he was getting a little more than unhappy with the line of questioning.

“Maybe I should. Maybe I should.” Johnnie smiled, nodding his head as if a thought had just popped in his head. He quickly stood up from the table, finished his tea, grabbed the tab, and abruptly left. “I’ll call you on my follow up story,” he commented to Angus, who was surprised at Porter’s sudden departure.

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Angus drove back to the ranch and told his parents that the reporter had basic questions about the accident and then without explaining got up and left. “It was a crazy interview,” he said to his parents.

CHAPTER 7

September 1967

Angus and Khoy met with Major Lin and his units to set up the ambush. Major Lin was becoming more friendly with Angus because Angus was able to get more of the weapons and heavy artillery that the major had requested. The marines were picked up at the firebase and two helicopters flew toward the location where the boat had been discovered and the skirmish had killed five VietCong soldiers.

The boat had not been moved. The men began setting up the ambush. The howitzers were in place at the top of the hill overlooking the river. The men were well hidden up and down the river bank. Major Lin, Angus and Khoy were up near the howitzers.

On the second morning, just as the sun was half way over the horizon, more than a dozen North Vietnamese soldiers were observed across the river. They had carried three flat bottom boats to the water. Each boat could hold four men. The still morning air allowed Major Lin and Khoy to understand what was being said. The NVA leaders wondered why the one boat had been left on the other side of the river. The enemy had plans to use this location for more future crossings.

Four NVA soldiers got into each boat and poled across the river to the other side. Nine men got out, sat on the sandy beach, and lit up cigarettes. One uncovered the hidden boat and joined the other three as they crossed back to the other side. Eight more soldiers could be seen coming out of the woods on the other side and got into the boats. When the four boats reached the mid-point of the river, Major

Lin gave the signal. The howitzers opened and some of Major Lin's men began firing on the eight who were exposed on the beach while other men zeroed in on the boats stranded in the water. Two of the boats began sinking because of direct mortar hits. The surviving men began swimming back to the shore. The river current was causing them to slowly float down river, where more of Major Lin's men were waiting to pick them off one by one. The eight VietCong who had been waiting on the beach, scrambled for their weapons but the men with the M-60's prevented any of them from reaching their weapons. They never figured out where their enemy was!

Blood stained the clear water of the river. Bodies, some faceup and others face down, were floating with the slow-moving current. Pieces of the wooden boats were mixed with the bodies. Looking through his binoculars Major Lin was pleased with the success of the ambush. The dead were checked for maps and military papers. The American marines from the firebase knew that there would now be another attack on them in retaliation.

The next day after breakfast, Angus stopped to ask Cindi Le if they could go out that evening after she got off work. Cindi Le agreed responding, "Meet me at the Jeanne d' Arc High School steps at 1730. We will just have time to go to Dong Ba Market. Hue is known for its beef noodle soup with lemongrass, fermented shrimp paste and chili oil added. If you don't like spicy food, we can drop the chili oil. There's also a coffee café with the best egg coffee you'll ever taste. Then our dessert will be mooncake and jasmine tea. I bet you'll like it." she smiled at him as she hoped he would agree. She loved his big Texas smile.

The walk along Dong Ba Market was longer than Angus expected. It was like a big food flea market. Vendors had trays and baskets of crickets, ants, silk worm larva, even scorpions, as well as all sorts of edible flowers and tree leaves. Meats included lamb, chicken, fish, pork, and beef. Everything was presented differently than Angus was used to seeing at the Brookside grocery store back in Texas. The street was crowded with various dance teams doing their

traditional lion and unicorn dances. Bystanders wearing their No'n La, the traditional, conical hats cheered them on. Colorful decorated lanterns were strung across the wet street. The breeze made the lanterns dance above their heads creating shadows which bounced around the crowd and the vendors. The ceremony of releasing the lanterns into the river would be later that evening.

As they walked and talked Angus learned more about her mother and father. Andre Bonnay, her father, had been assigned to the French ambassador's staff in London after France pulled out of Vietnam. Cindi Le had finished her high school years in France and one year at the Institute Catholique deParis. When Andre was sent to London for two years, she enrolled at the University of Westminster. Later, Andre was promoted to overseer of a rubber plantation in Indochina, but Kim Ly, her mother, did not care for the living conditions there. She moved to Hue because it was her home; where she had grown up, went to school and met Andre. Cindi Le now lived with her mother in a nice, comfortable home along the Perfume River. After she began working at the MACV, Cindi Le started night courses at the University of Hue.

Cindi Le learned that Angus was mostly Irish. He too was an only child and he loved ranching. His family had the largest Black Angus herd in southeast Texas. He had graduated from Texas A&M University last May. He talked about Rob, his best buddy, being a graduate student in the Gas and Oil Department at Texas A&M. He reminded her that Rob was the friend who had the bright idea that the Texas soil and climate could support a rubber tree plantation. He said he liked hunting and fishing with Rob when not working on the ranch. He asked Cindi Le if she had any serious boyfriends.

"Not really," she answered, "Actually, the Vietnamese men do not feel comfortable with a half French woman and the French feel the same way about me being half Vietnamese. I did like London because they're less biased, but my mother needs my help in Hue. I like the city of Hue's old history and way of life," she admitted to Angus.

“Well you seem to be very well educated and you’re a very pretty young lady. I like you a lot as you are. I did not know there were racial biases in countries other than America.” Then he changed the topic of their conversation, “This noodle soup has a unique taste. Normally I do not care for noodle soup, but this is tasty. It must be the lemongrass and whatever else they've thrown in makes it so unique. Where is the mooncake and egg coffee?” Angus asked as he glanced at his watch. He needed to be back on the base by 2200 hours

“Come on I’ll show you,” Cindi Le replied as she grabbed his hand. He noticed her long light brown hair flowing over her shoulders as she quickly stood up from the small table. She wore a long, white, fitted silk tunic called an Ao Dai, over her traditional flowing pants. A design of horses racing went from the bottom of her Ao Dai on one side across the front to her other shoulder.

Angus pointed to her tunic and said, “I like your shirt with horses. Do you like horses?”

She told him that she had ridden in competition in France. The best she had done was second place in the Arabian Breed Championship. They talked about horses until Angus said that he really needed to get back to the compound. They walked back to the high school steps and departed with a “Good night, see you in the morning.” Cindi Le quickly caught herself and offered, “Angus, if you would like, sometime I’ll show some more what Hue has to offer. The next time you need to try Com Tam. It’s a favorite of a lot of the street vendors. It consists of rice and bar b que pork or beef, you’ll probably prefer the beef, and a fried egg.”

“That would be great. I would like to know more about Hue and the surrounding area and have you for a guide. Thanks for the tour tonight. I did enjoy getting out of the compound,” he grinned back at her.

It was 0400 when the duty NCO knocked on the door. "Lt. McKay. Wake up! I have an urgent message from the major." Angus staggered over to the door and slowly opened it. "Major Lathon needs to see you in his office immediately. He just received a hot secret message."

Angus was surprised to see the major in his pajamas and house robe sipping a cup of coffee. "Angus, close the door. Sit down. We just received a special message from the green berets. They read your report about the locals telling you that the VietCong have a nun and six or seven young girls ranging in age from eight to fifteen years, in a makeshift POW camp somewhere in Cambodia. They want you to get a tracking position on the location. McKay, this is a dangerous military mission. This is a top-secret assignment. You will not be in uniform. If captured you will be treated as a spy. You are not being ordered to accept."

"Why do they need me?" Angus questioned.

"You have a relationship with this local because you gave him twenty dollars to help cover the cost of the water buffalo the VietCong took from him." The Major continued, "The plan is for you to go back to the village with more rice, meat and other supplies for the locals. He does not need to know this but there will be a device to track him so we can learn the coordinates of the POW compound. He'll have enough pork and chickens to be able to trade for his water buffalo."

Angus considered thoughtfully, "What if this fails?"

"If this fails, it becomes a search and rescue mission, which means lost time. They may move the girls before we can find the compound. It puts our men at more of a risk being in Cambodia," the major responded. Then he added, "Your man needs to make the trade and be able to draw a map of the compound. Once he does that, the green berets will draw up an extraction plan. They need to know how many guards are there and have a general idea of where the nun and

girls are being held. Angus, these green berets are specially trained. Once they can visualize the camp layout and know the numbers, they can go into action.”

Angus paused in deep consideration and slowly inquired, “What about the safety of the girls during the extraction? When do we start? Will I be part of the extraction?”

“The team is also concerned about the girls,” the major responded. “When they know about where they are located, they will make every effort to protect that area. Yes, you will have a small assignment in this mission. The team will discuss your objective and participation in more detail later. They want to begin today! Angus, you do not have to accept. This is not an order. Do you understand this is not an order? Yes or no, do you accept?”

Angus asked, “What about Khoy? Can he come with me?”

“No! I am the only one who is to know about this. Not even General Tran knows!” clarified the major.

“Yes sir. I understand! How do I get the money for the supplies?” he questioned.

“McKay you’ll be required to sign a release before you go, which will free the US government of any wrongdoing, and make clear that this is not a US government order. The green berets are standing by in DaNang. They flew in earlier this morning. There’s a driver outside to drive you to DaNang. Wear your uniform there, but take civilian clothes. You’ll change in to your civvies after the local gets back to you from meeting the VietCong. Have nothing on to reveal your name or that you are military.

“Good decision,” Major Lathon reassured Angus as he signed the paperwork. The major emptied his coffee cup, looked up and said, “Good luck. I’ll want to hear all about it when you get back.”

There were fifteen green berets waiting for him at an obscure hut at the far end of the Da Nang air base runway. They were sitting around reading and playing cards. The room was musty with cigarette smoke. The success of the plan hinged on Angus getting the local to go back to the POW camp and being able to make a basic drawing of it. They needed to know what kind of fencing was being used, how many VietCong could be seen and where the girls were being held. Every one began changing into their civvies. They grabbed their backpacks and weapons. Angus picked out a Car 15. It looked to be a brand-new Colt Automatic Rifle. It had an ultrashort 11.5-inch barrel compared to the 20-inch barrel on the M-16. It was lighter, too. It could fire over 700 rounds per minute. With 30 rounds it weighed a few ounces over six pounds.

“Good choice, McKay. The CAR-15 is just now being released for field work. We’ve found it superior to the M-16,” said the colonel in charge of the mission.

Twelve men jumped in the helicopter. “Where are the other three?” Angus asked with a concerned tone.

“They are our rescue in case we need them. There is another helicopter for them and for the girls. There’s a doctor in case we need one. McKay, keep your fatigues on ‘til we know the local is willing to participate. We will be waiting for you a few miles from the village. You get his agreement. Come back to us and change to civvies. Then we execute our plan, do you understand?” the colonel reviewed Angus’s mission.

The helicopter ride took two hours. It landed two miles east of the small village that was along a river. At noon Angus walked into the village. He had carried seventy pounds of rice, pork and chicken, plus \$100 equivalent in Vietnamese currency, all available for trading for the water buffalo. There also were a couple of bottles of a strong knockout whiskey. The POW compound was west, across the shallow river at nearly an hour of cross-country walking. It would take six hours for the farmer to walk to the POW camp and return

with his water buffalo. The tracking device was dropped as the farmer entered the front gate. The impact of hitting the ground that was partially covered by tall grass activated the device.

Back at the helicopter a monitor flashed. "We have coordinates!" a green beret reported to his officer. The colonel checked his watch. It had taken four hours for the farmer to get to the POW site. The colonel then calculated that Angus should return from the village at about 0130.

A misty, foggy night delayed the farmer's return. It was 0200 hours when the happy, tired farmer entered his darkened village with his water buffalo. Angus greeted him and thanked him. The farmer returned the change. He had proved to be a good trader for the water buffalo, or as the local call them, tractors. Angus took the man's hands and returned money that he had brought back. "You keep. Buy a new cart," he told the farmer.

"*Ca'mo n*" said the farmer. Then he bowed to show respect as Angus began the two-mile trip back toward the parked helicopter. At first, he could not see the helicopter because it had been covered with netting to camouflage its location.

"Man, we were getting worried about you. Everything OK?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, the farmer got his water buffalo back," reported Angus. "The tracking device was dropped near the front gate. He counted six or seven guards. The girls are in the far back of the camp in a makeshift shelter. He could see the girls were frightened to death," Angus commented. "The farmer was upset that they would not let him have his cart back." He handed the colonel a sheet of paper with a rough drawing of the POW camp. The men gathered around their colonel as his flashlight focused on the sketch the farmer had provided. Angus changed into his civvies as the colonel began giving each team their assignment.

“OK, McKay and I will approach the front gate. Team one, you circle around to the north side, team two you cover the south side, team three, work around to the back to protect the girls in case a guard or two heads toward the girls. Back team shoot up the flares when you’re in position. Each of you take out your target. I do not want any guard near those girls,” ordered the colonel.

The men armed with grenades, cluster bombs and their rifles left the helicopter in quiet formation. Angus and the colonel led the squad to the POW camp. The chicken wire fence was the only barrier around the quarter acre where the girls were being held prisoner. The moon light was broken by clouds floating across the sky. The camp was in a meadow clearing surrounded by hills lined with trees. The colonel stopped and each man dropped to one knee. He motioned for the men to take their positions. Turning to Angus the colonel warned, “Be ready if anyone approaches you, but does not stop when you say, ‘Halt!’ shoot to kill! I’ve lost too many men who’ve gotten blown up because the enemy blew himself up within six feet of them.”

There was no sound from any of the guards. No one was walking around. With his night goggles Angus could see the cart in front of a makeshift tent. The time was 0300 and two flares lit the area like spot lights beaming down on the camp. VietCong guards woke from their hard sleep induced by the knock out whiskey. They stood up, staggered around, and looked confused about what was happening. Gun fire erupted in the silent night air and three VietCong soldiers grabbed their chests screaming in pain, their knees buckled and they fell dead. Two other guards ran toward the makeshift shelter where muffled cries of the girls could be heard. Two rounds of bullets hit their targets as both guards fell backward from the force of the impact.

The colonel and Angus rushed through the only gate of the compound. There were three dead guards sprawled out near the table with an empty bottle of whiskey toppled on its side. A big pot of rice and chicken sat on the cart. That and the half-eaten mooncake, along with mangos had been the guards’ final meal. Two men were cut

down on their run toward the girls. The colonel looked at Angus and asked, "Only five?"

Angus shrugged, "Maybe the local was wrong?" He did not have an answer. The dimming flares were slowly drifting toward the earth. The night was darkened by clouds and the air was silent.

"OK teams, click on your flashlights. Be on guard as you walk slowly to the shelter. There may be a Charlie lurking in the weeds," commanded the colonel. "Stay alert!"

Angus slowly walked over to the table. There were four guards lying on the ground around the makeshift shelter. One was a young VietCong soldier lying in the tall grass. He had drunk too much of the 'knock out' whisky and had passed out. He never woke up. Angus pointed his rifle at each man. The colonel gently pushed Angus' weapon aside. He stepped past Angus, pulled out his revolver and shot each one in the head. Angus flinched and turned his head. Two more single head shots came from near the shelter.

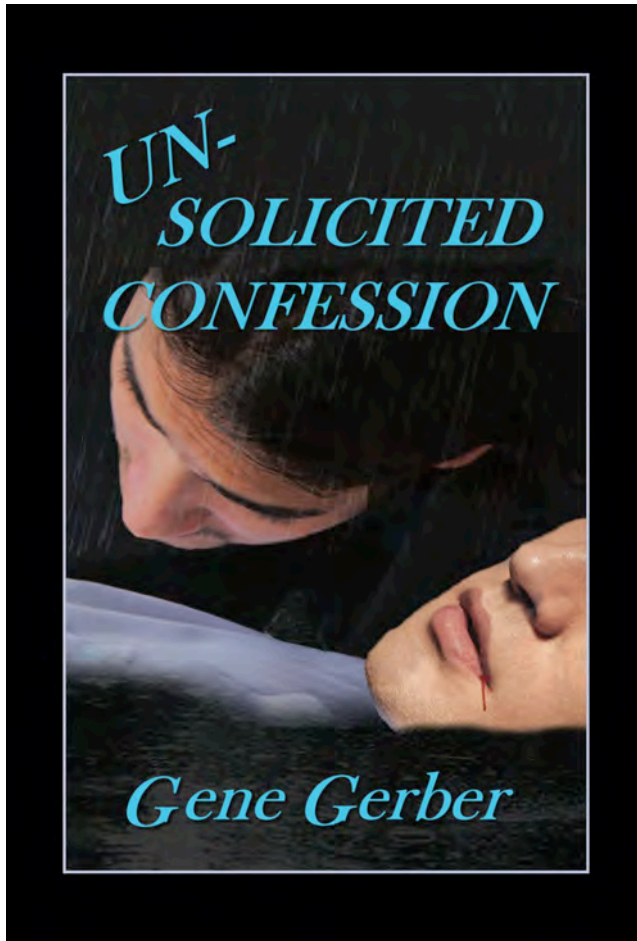
"This one must have had too much of our knock out whiskey," the colonel said putting his pistol back in his holster. "OK, check for names, maps, papers, whatever we can use. Pull 'em into the shelter. Burn the shelter and the cart. We have two helicopters landing here in three minutes. Try to calm the girls down. Give 'em the chocolate bars we brought for them," the colonel ordered the men.

The nun followed by the girls, stopped in front of the Colonel. "*Je Vous Remercie, Dieute Benisse,*" she said in French. Translated in English, it meant: "Thank you and God bless you."

Angus was shocked when the colonel began conversing with her in French. Angus understood the word Da Nang. The girls were given water and chocolate bars as they were helped onto the helicopters. Each girl had signs of rope burns on her wrists. The flames from the burning shelter and cart lit the area as the helicopters lifted off the Cambodian soil.

It was 0600 when the helicopters landed in Da Nang. There were medical people waiting to care for the nun and girls. A jeep was waiting to drive Angus back to Hue.

“McKay, a job well done. Here’s a green beret bar. You can’t wear it but you can tell your kids how you earned it. Congratulations! Thanks for your help in making this a successful rescue mission. Regrettably it won’t go on your record, but Major Lathon knows about it. I bet he’ll take care of you,” the colonel complimented Angus and shook his hand. Then the colonel turned toward the hut at the end of the runway.



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