

A white sailboat with a large white sail is sailing on a blue sea under a cloudy sky. The sun is shining brightly in the upper right corner, creating a lens flare effect. The boat has a blue canopy and a yellow lifebuoy. The text 'The Rose' is written in a cursive font across the sail, and 'Al Perrin' is written in a serif font below it.

The Rose

Al Perrin

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Chapter 1

They kicked in the door and went over to the astonished old man sitting in his easy chair. He was just starting to put down his paper and get up when they silently shoved him back down.

“What – what *is* this?” the old man stuttered, his hands still down on the arms of the easy chair.

The one nearest to him slapped him hard with the back of his hand and pointed at him. “Just sit right there, old man and you won't get hurt. Now where's the asswipe?”

The old man put his hand to his cheek. “Who? What are you talking about? What do you want?”

“We want the little punk who ripped us off,” the stocky man said. “Now, where *is* he?”

The one who slapped the old man grabbed him by the front of his shirt ripping the buttons. He flipped his switchblade up under his nose and held it there. The stocky man stood next to the chair as he flexed his fists back and forth. He was an ugly man with thick puffy cheeks and a livid scar underneath his chin.

“I'll check the upstairs,” he said.

Suddenly from upstairs came the sound of a scuffle and then footsteps.

“I found him,” the stocky man said, holding the old man's grandson with his arm behind his back.

“Tim!” The old man exclaimed. “These hoodlums want *you*?”

“Shut *up* old man!” The one next to him yelled as he slapped him again.

The old man's hands trembled in rage as he watched the stocky man twist Tim's arm even tighter behind his back, making him squirm in pain.

“Oh yes. Yes. Okay. Okay. I'll be quiet. Just don't hurt the boy.”

“That's better Gramps. Now just sit right there and you won't get hurt.”

The stocky man held Tim up almost off his feet as the one who slapped the old man walked slowly over to them, his switchblade down in his hand. He grabbed the struggling teenager by the front of his shirt bringing the switchblade up to his throat.

“Now.” He growled. “What did you do with the stuff? It ain’t *in* the car!”

“I – I dumped it down the sewer!” Tim said. “I don’t have it!”

“*Bullshit!* Now I want that stuff or the money right *now!*”

“I got to go to the john,” the old man said.

“Shut-up!” The one who slapped him screamed in his high-pitched voice.

“I – I’ll soil my pants!” The old man yelled, squirming back and forth in his chair.

“Let him go.” The stocky man laughed. “He won’t do nothing – will you grandpaw?” He grinned twisting Tim’s arm behind his back.

“No. No. I’ll be right back. Just don’t hurt the boy.”

“Okay. No funny stuff Pops, or you’re going to get what the asswipe here is going to get if he don’t cough up with some stuff right now!”

The old man got up from his chair and shuffled meekly down the hallway to the bathroom and turned on the light. He carefully closed the door behind him and then quickly went out the other door to the spare bedroom. This was his war room where he kept all the souvenirs from when he was in Vietnam.

He got the old M1 rifle out of its stock and ran his hand over it. It wasn’t the same rifle he had in Saigon and Dai Do fighting the Vietcong, but it would do. He sighed. It was a long time since he was in Vietnam – thirty-six years ago – thirty-six centuries ago. He could remember it all as if it were yesterday, the sweet sickly stench of death hanging over everything and the infiltrators slitting throats within their own lines while they slept. Then there were the terrifying mass attacks in the night and the slight grunt a man makes when the bayonet finds its mark. His bayonet flashed red in the moonlight then.

He ran his finger over the breech and sighed. His wife made him file down the firing pin decades ago, afraid that their small son would discharge it by accident.

He opened the display case and took out a bayonet, snapping it onto the muzzle of the old rifle with a quiet click. If he couldn't bluff them with the useless rifle, then at least he had the bayonet. He made a couple of silent bayonet thrusts with it now, the moonlight flashing off its still razor-sharp edge. He was a hero back then in Dai Do – a very big hero. He was even awarded the Silver Star and the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Nixon. They still hung there in their dusty case and the old man ran his fingers over them trying to remember what it was like to be brave.

Silently, he moved down the darkened hallway past the closed bathroom door with the light still on inside. He held the M1 up in front of him, flattening himself up against the wall. The old man's son and daughter-in-law were killed back in the early eighties in some drug-related foul play like what threatened his only grandson now. Back then, when Tim's parents were killed, he wasn't able to help them, but he was determined now that they wouldn't kill one of his own again. He could hear them in the living room as they slapped his grandson back and forth.

Out he came into the light, holding his rifle up in front of him, with its bayonet at the end. Both men were turned away from him, looking down at the unconscious Tim at their feet.

“Okay.” The old man growled. “Get away from him!”

Both men whirled around astonished and stared at him for a moment, not moving. Suddenly, they both burst out laughing.

“Old man – put that thing away. That antique hasn't fired for years,” the stocky man said, smirking.

“No. No. Let him come on,” the other one said laughing. “I haven't cut up an old man for a long time.” Grinning, the one who slapped him waved his switchblade back and forth, as he advanced. He jumped forward past the rifle and slashed at him.

With a swift deft motion, the old man brought the rifle down and stepping backward, he thrust the bayonet forward deep into the

man's abdomen. “*Ha!*” He shouted like he did so often in Dai Do. The sounds of battle roared in his ears.

The stocky man stood for a moment shocked, staring down at his fallen comrade. The old man advanced slowly toward him, his reddened bayonet out in front. The stocky man backed up, his eyes narrowing as he realized that this old man wasn't so “old” after all. He flipped up his switchblade and waved it back and forth in front of him. Warily, they circled each other, the old man thrusting at him as the stocky man dodged back and forth, slashing at him with his blade.

Suddenly, the stocky man took up a lamp and threw it at the old man, hitting him in the face and knocking him down. The M1 with its bayonet clattered off in the corner. The stocky man leapt down on him, holding the switchblade in his face.

“Now old man,” he said quietly. “Good-bye.”

He smiled and with an evil look on his face, grabbed the old man's hair and turned his head to the side, exposing his throat. All the old man could think of was that he failed his grandson, too.

All of a sudden, the stocky man gave a jolt and fell over on his side, arching his back. He reached back frantically as if he had a sudden severe itch that he couldn't quite reach. Tim stood over him and put his foot in the middle of his back. He pulled the old M1's bayonet out of him.

Tim stood looking down at him with an astonished look on his face. “Bastard!” he said.

The old man smiled. He hadn't failed his grandson after all.

Tim reached down and helped his grandfather to his feet. He threw down the old M1.

“Are you all right Grandpa?” he said. “Are you hurt?”

The old man took a deep sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. “No. I'm all right. How are *you*?” He reached up to Tim's bruised face and turned his chin sideways, looking at him intently.

Tim reached up to his bleeding mouth and nodded out of breath. “I'm okay.”

Grandpa looked all around at the dead bodies suddenly in his living room.

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“So,” he looked up at Tim. “You want to tell me what just happened here?”