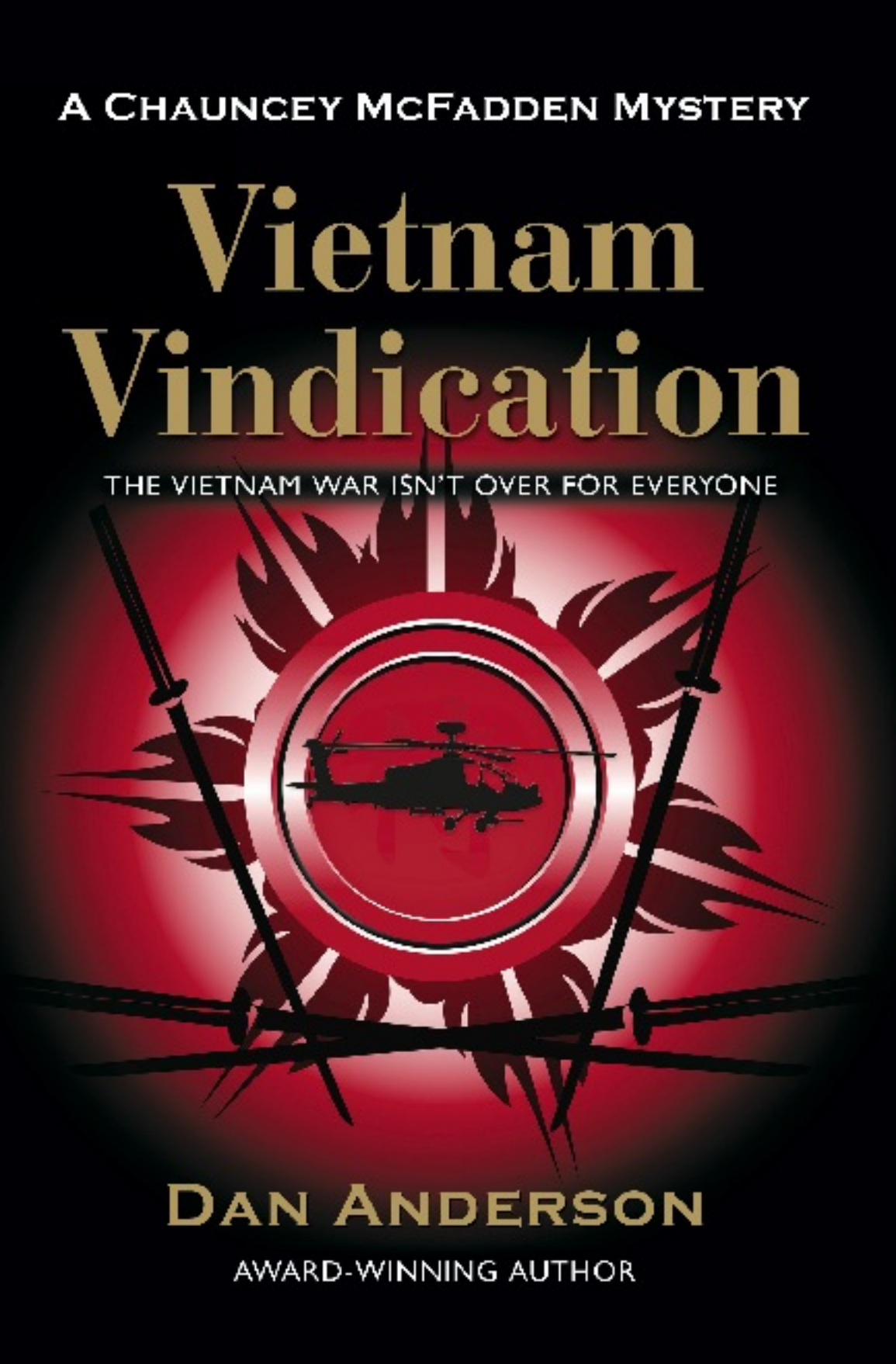
A Chauncey McFadden Mystery

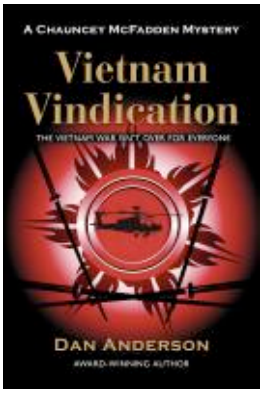
Vietnam Vindication

THE VIETNAM WAR ISN'T OVER FOR EVERYONE



Dan Anderson

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



For the past five years, a vicious assassin has methodically murdered members of an Army unit who served in Vietnam on the first day of Tet. Chauncey McFadden, Los Angeles PI, is asked to help stop this brutal vendetta before it claims the lives of the remaining squad members. Despite Chauncey's best efforts, the body count soars as victims are dispatched in ritualistic ways by a killer as enigmatic as he is lethal.

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Chapter 1

"*We're being murdered one by one!*

"Each year for the past five years, one of the squad members I served with in 'Nam's been killed. That's why I'm so uptight, Mr. McFadden, and why I came to your detective agency for help."

In his case, an acknowledgement of fear wasn't necessary. My visitor squirmed in his chair like a petulant child with rectal rash and dabbed his face from time-to-time with the back of his wide tie. He had wiped his sweaty palms on the thighs of his light beige trousers so often that the resulting dark spots had begun to resemble the silhouettes on a Rorschach test. Sweating profusely, he used his palms to slake the perspiration on his forehead back over his bald head which made it glisten in the mid-morning light.

My anxiety was almost as great as his. I had only handled a couple of homicides and nearly gotten myself killed in the process. My normal investigation practice consisted of rather mundane fare such as matrimonial infidelity, missing persons, background checks for pre-nups and child custody, insurance fraud, evidence procurement, and surveillance. They didn't pay all that well, but could usually be completed without lethal consequences. The few murder cases I had taken on were motivated more by the negative balance in my checking account which trumped my concern for personal mortality.

"Your anxiety is understandable, Mr. Coleman. Do you live here in the L.A. area?"

Coleman stopped sweating long enough to nod.

I looked at the December 1981 calendar thumbtacked above the empty water cooler and did a quick mental calculation. "And these five murders have happened annually since 1977?"

Coleman nodded again and rose to his feet from the folding chair in front of my desk and walked to the sole window in the room. The dreary concrete streets and buildings on the other side of the dirty

window panes appeared to inspire little in the way of enthusiasm in him. Once a decent, middle-class neighborhood, the area had been overrun by urban blight and pillaging parasitic gangs that sucked the commercial vitality from it leaving nothing but bare bones and economic desiccation. After there was nothing left to loot, the gangs abruptly abandoned the area for more promising pickings to the west in the San Fernando Valley. The few shops that remained open scrambled for marginal subsistence, catering to the tastes of those who slunk in the peripheral shadows of society. After failing to detect any pedestrian or vehicular activity, he turned from the window and looked around my sparsely furnished office apprehensively. He was undoubtedly expecting more posh décor, but perpetually empty coffers had indefinitely delayed any thoughts of remodeling. He loosened his tie and returned to his chair assuming a slumped posture.

In an attempt to put him at ease, I chose a lie as the best option. "This is a branch office I recently opened. I'm considering several decoration proposals, but remain undecided. Let's start at the beginning, shall we, Mr. Coleman? Fill me in on your military background since that appears to be germane to the case." I reached into the drawer of my desk and removed a small spiral notebook and a ballpoint pen.

Coleman took a deep breath and clasped his pudgy hands around a knee. "I was in the Army from '68 to '70. I took Basic Training at Fort Benning, Georgia and AIT—Advanced Individual Training—at Fort Polk, Louisiana. In May of '69 I was ordered to 'Nam for a tour of duty. I stayed in country until May of '70 when I returned stateside and got discharged."

"You only served two years?"

"I was drafted when my student exemption expired; draftees served two years while volunteers served a four-year enlistment."

"What did you do in the Army?"

"I shipped over as a PFC but made sergeant by the time I DEROSed. My MOS was Eleven Bravo Forty."

"Can you put that in English?"

Coleman smiled faintly and nodded. "DEROS is Date Eligible to Return from Overseas. MOS stands for Military Occupational

Specialty. Eleven Bravo Forty meant you were a grunt – a ground-pounder in the infantry."

"What outfit were you with?"

"The Americal Infantry Division—the 198th Light Infantry Brigade, the 1st Battalion of the 6th Infantry. It was headquartered in I Corps."

"I Corps being . . .?"

"The northernmost tactical zone. 'Nam had forty-five provinces divided into four tactical zones, and I Corps was the zone closest to the DMZ."

"How many soldiers were in your squad?"

"There were eight of us in '70 when I got out."

"Why do you suspect that the deaths are homicides and that they're related?"

Coleman rubbed imaginary stubble on his chin and squirmed some more. "We're a tight group and have stayed in touch ever since we got stateside. We attend the Americal Veteran's Association annual reunion where we play catch-up and swap lies. We were uncomfortable at the first reunions because almost all of the attendees were from World War II and many of them seemed to regard 'Nam vets as second-class warriors, since the conflict ended without victory. We were eventually welcomed into the military brotherhood on equal footing.

"In '77 things began to unravel. We started losing one squad member every year. In the beginning, we didn't think much of it since a clear pattern hadn't formed that we could recognize. Then it hit us like a tsunami; these deaths were always the result of a freak accident or suspicious suicide, never homicide or natural causes."

"Tell me about them."

"The first to die was a kid from Milwaukee named Kasmir 'Kos' Koslowski, a big, strong Czech who could pick up the end of a jeep with one hand and change a flat tire with the other. He was absolutely fearless of everything except snakes. He was strong as an ox but dumber than a sack of lug nuts."

"What happened to him?"

"Get this: he died from a snake bite. He was found dead in his garage by neighbors who hadn't seen him in several days. He was working out with weights when he was bitten on his thigh by a snake. It

took doctors a while to identify the species, which turned out to be a Russell's viper."

"A Russell's viper? Where would you get a viper in Milwaukee? They're one of the deadliest snakes in the world, but they aren't found outside of tropical climates such as Southeast Asia. Was it a pet of another family member?"

"Kos was single. He hated snakes so much that he talked of retiring in Hawaii or Ireland where there aren't any."

I had some difficulty absorbing this information. "It's for certain the viper didn't escape from a pet shop or fall out of a herpetologist's pocket. It's illegal to own one of those things. How do they know that the bite was administered by a viper—did they find it at the scene?"

"The snake was nowhere to be found, but the venom is unique to the species. Kos died of heart and lung failure before medical help was called. The venom doesn't usually kill immediately, but he was bitten several times. The coroner says Kos died within hours. In any event, the cops couldn't find any evidence to the contrary, so they wrote it off as an accident."

I took some notes and asked, "Who was the next squad victim?"

"An African-American kid from the south side of Chicago; a gang banger by the name of Jerome 'The Shank' Manigault. He claimed to be a member of the Blackstone Rangers, a group of street criminals that later became black power militants, but that might have been a crock of bull. What wasn't debatable was his skill with a knife. I'll never forget the time a few of us were sitting around LZ Cook outside of Phu Bien leaning on our shovels. We'd been working all day fortifying the perimeter—diggin' trenches, fillin' sand bags and stringin' concertina wire—when we stopped to take a break and have a smoke. We hadn't seen a VC sapper who'd crawled through our Claymore mines and sneaked up behind us. When the sapper was no more than thirty feet away, he jumped to his feet and leveled his AK-47 at us. No one saw him but Shank who coolly whipped out his shiv and let'er fly. He caught the gook dead center in his left eye. Charlie was dead before he hit the ground.

"His favorite sport was horse racing, but there weren't any nags in 'Nam so he had to improvise. Before he transferred to our unit he'd

been an aerial door gunner on a 'Firebird' gunship and manned one of the two M-60s on board. While in flight, if the crew saw a herd of water buffalo on the ground, they'd get a stampede going by firing at their feet. The fastest buffalo earned the privilege of surviving for another day while the losers were shot."

I experienced some moral discomfort with this wartime sport and was now the one squirming in my chair. "Was it necessary to execute the slower afoot? Why not let them retire from the fields; be put out to pasture to perform stud service like old racehorses?"

Coleman apparently didn't share my concern for the sanctity of animal life. "Shooting at 'Vietnamese tractors,' as they were called, is more humane than peppering dinks in the rice paddies. Besides, they use the hides of water buffaloes to make tips for pool cues."

I was learning more about war than I cared to know. I had also developed a newfound respect for billiards. "Changing the subject, how did Shank die?"

"His body was found in his bookie's parking lot in a section of town you wouldn't let your sister walk through. It was well-known that Shank loved to play the horses, and he'd stopped by to place some bets. He was found slumped over on the pavement. His gut had been opened up with a knife."

In an attempt to lighten this morbid turn in the conversation I quipped, "Live by the knife—die by the knife. Placing a bet of my own, I'll wager it was ruled suicide by *hara-kiri*."

Coleman's eyes widened and he gaped at me with what appeared to be professional respect. "How'd you know? A knife was gripped in Shank's hand and there were no eyewitnesses or evidence of foul play."

Changing my approach to keep his new perception of my competence intact, I nodded my head knowingly. "I imagine the police did an onsite evaluation of the neighborhood and the victim and wrapped up the investigation in record time. We have areas like that in South Central L.A. where Avon ladies carry Mace, and the ice cream men make their rounds in armored cars accompanied by an armed guard riding shotgun. I gather you don't think Shank was the suicide type?"

Coleman laughed. "You got that right. The only way Shank would take his own life is if the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders were waiting for him behind the pearly gates. He was even thinking of converting to the Muslim faith so that seventy-two virgins and a river of honey would be waiting for him in the afterlife. Shank claimed his high school hadn't had seventy-two virgins since its founding back in the '30s as a WPA project."

"Who was victim number three?" I prodded, finishing up my notes.

"'One Nut' Negrón."

I looked at Coleman suspiciously. "I suspect there's also a story behind that nickname."

"You're catching on quick," Coleman said. "Francisco Negrón was the best point man in the Americal. He had a keen nose and good eyesight, which worked to our benefit time after time. I'll never forget the day he was ditty-boppin' down a jungle trail and suddenly stopped, pointed to an area off the beaten path, and told us to clear the vegetation away. We pulled camouflaging branches aside and discovered a tunnel that contained more than two-hundred Chicom grenades, forty satchel charges, two-dozen AK-47s, ten AK-50s and six RPGs."

I could never get over the fact that while veterans may not be able to remember what they had for breakfast that morning, they could mentally hurtle back in time and, without pause, rattle off military minutia like a dirty limerick.

"In addition to munitions, he could also smell NVA regulars and VC a half-mile away. On more than one occasion his keen nose and good eyesight kept us out of a horseshoe ambush. If you wander into one of those, you better have a 'Blue Ghost' gunship standing by to rake fire over the area, or Charlie will tighten your shit for you.

"One Nut got the nickname after his first enlistment ended. He was doing a duffle bag drag and bowl of cornflakes . . ."

I interrupted. "In civilian jargon, please."

Coleman nodded and explained. "That was the final meal at Ton Son Nhut Air Force Base prior to boarding the freedom bird for the flight back to the land of the big PX. Before the soldiers were allowed to board the plane, they were told to throw any drugs in their

possession into amnesty boxes provided for that purpose since MACV—the Military Assistance Command Vietnam—had a hard-ass attitude about carrying drugs out of country. Most of the guys went through their pockets and duffel bags and complied with the order. Francisco decided he'd take the risk and attempted to board the plane with a bag of weed shoved down the front of his pants. One of the drug-sniffing German shepherds broke away from its handler and jumped Francisco, ripping off part of his crotch. One testicle was still intact, but the damn dog ate the other one. Despite rolling around on the floor in agony, One Nut looked up at the MP and asked, 'Do I get a purple heart for this?' One Nut was one tough *dinky dau*—crazy—bastard."

"That's an interesting story, particularly because of the delicious irony."

"Irony? What do you mean?" Coleman asked.

"It's ironic that One Nut was undone by something with a better sense of smell than his."

Coleman frowned, apparently not as amused as I by irony.

"Moving on, what did One Nut do to warrant taps?"

"His body was found in a room of a motel he owned in San Juan, Puerto Rico—the *Cabra* Inn."

"And . . ." I prompted by moving my hand in a circular motion.

"The toxicology report said he'd died from an overdose of heroin."

I reflected on this briefly. "Then the cause of death doesn't appear to be unreasonable. One Nut did have a history of drug use, didn't he?"

"One Nut would puff a little ganja now and then, but he didn't do hard drugs at all, much less being addicted to the point of overdosing."

"This is getting curiouser and curiouser. Tell me about the fourth victim."

"That's Woo-Suk Kim otherwise known as the 'Masan Monkey or 'M&M' for short."

"I'm repeating myself, but there's gotta be a story behind that nickname as well."

"M&M was a little Asian kid born in a city in southeast South Korea called Masan, but raised in Bakersfield by his grandparents after his folks died. He was short—about five feet tall—and weighed no

more than one-ten soaking wet. Because he was so small and wiry, the Army made him a tunnel rat, and he became one of the best in the brigade. He discovered more weapons caches hidden underground than anybody I can remember. He was also responsible for producing dozens of *hoi chans* whom he found hiding down there."

"Hoy what?"

"*Hoi chans*. They were VC and NVA soldiers who surrendered and came over to our side as part of the *Chieu Hoi* program. Most of'em were mere kids—as young as twelve—who'd been conscripted into military service. Constant bombing from our B-52s and long-range artillery prompted a lot of'em to come over to our side once they received an official invite.

"Getting back to M&M, he got his nickname from his ability to climb trees like a monkey. He could scoot up a tree faster than you could fall out of one. He was a hit with the villagers because of his ability to rescue trapped kittens and kites and pick high-hanging fruit.

"His skills had important military value, too. Many times when we were in the field, we were covered by a triple-canopy of overhead vegetation and couldn't be seen from the air. If we got lost, or drew enemy fire while in this kind of terrain, our choppers couldn't find us. In those instances M&M could climb a tree and shoot off a flare to indicate our position below."

"Where did M&M live and how did he die?"

"He met a little Asian girl at a USO dance in Seattle and moved there to be near her." Coleman then sighed and said, "You'll find this hard to believe also, but he supposedly broke his neck when he fell off the roof of his house while trying to connect his TV antenna to his chimney."

"You're right," I said. "While those kinds of accidents do happen, this one appears to fly in the face of the facts based upon M&M's mobile dexterity. How about the last victim?"

Coleman sighed and looked increasingly pained. "That would be the 'Professor,' Jordon Vandergrift. He was a pale, skinny kid with big ears and bright red hair, from Gainesville, a town in northeast Georgia—the Poultry Capital of the World. He'd no sooner got his degree in Veterinary Medicine from Iowa State University than his

draft notice showed up in the mailbox. His family didn't have the political clout to extend his educational deferment—and he didn't have the money to flee to Canada or Denmark to avoid service—so his college days came to a halt."

"It sounds like he may have had to intellectually and emotionally adjust to the realities of warfare," I said.

Coleman furrowed his brow as if to accelerate the process of recollection. "When he first arrived for orientation at the Chu Lai base camp, he was a cherry who appeared to be an unlikely candidate for a rifle company," Coleman said. "He was a pacifist who displayed little enthusiasm for combat. To look at him—gangly arms and glasses—you'd think he was a chaplain's assistant or 'chairborne ranger' working at division headquarters. He always looked scared, even when buying ice cream at the PX during a three-day stand-down."

Coleman paused as if struggling to pick the right words to string together. "He had that look of death you sometimes see on certain guys. It's hard to describe. It's a combination of things: body language, facial expression, voice, personality . . . They don't know they have it, but people around them can sense it, even if they can't define it, and it makes them uneasy. The grim reaper has his hand on their shoulder, but they don't feel a thing, even though the reaper is laughing as he always does when he takes a life before its time. Even money said the Professor would be in a body bag before he'd taken his first dump in a latrine."

There was silence for a while, which was a welcomed interruption. I could imagine Coleman's consciousness wandering to the Vietnam Veteran's War Memorial in D.C. and his mind's eye slowly scanning the names carved in granite.

Before the quiet proved awkward, Coleman perked up and actually smiled. "But then the Professor found himself. In the heat of a pitched battle on Nui Yon Hill south of Tam Ky, we discovered he had a skill that no one else possessed—a photographic memory. Out of boredom, back at camp he'd memorized the topographical maps of the area and the location of everything of significance: roads, trails, cities and villages, military installations, and geographic features like mountains, hills, and lakes. When our company commander, a shake n' bake—an

officer right out of OCS without any combat experience—and the FO—forward observer—got killed, the Professor picked up the Prick—the PRC-25 field radio—and relayed coordinates to an artillery battery at a distant fire base to bring smoke. The Professor's directions were so accurate that the NVA's position at the crest of the hill was obliterated within minutes. It wasn't until later that the Professor realized that if his calculations had been off, we could have received the pounding and been another one of those friendly fire casualty stories you hear about."

"That *is* impressive," I acknowledged. "It's too bad he's not around to train my newspaper boy who can't hit a driveway through the open window of a slow-moving van. How did the Prof expire?"

"When he got out of the Army, he returned to Gainesville, got married and entered the family business, which was processing chickens. They received live chickens from regional farmers and produced whole fryers, roasters, and chicken parts for the meat departments of butcher shops, gourmet markets, and grocery stores. He was found hanging from a rope one Sunday morning when the plant was closed. The coroner ruled it a suicide."

"What justification did they give for that finding?"

"There was no evidence of foul play and the only witnesses were dead chickens."

"Looking at the marital aspect, were the Vandergrifts having any relationship problems?"

"To the contrary, they'd only been married a year and were expecting a kid. At the reunions, Jordan was as happy as I've ever seen him—death of the squad members aside, that is.

"I don't know if this is important, but he did mention that he had taken out a big life insurance policy when he got married."

I shook my head. "That wouldn't be a factor. If they had only been married a year, the benefits wouldn't have been payable the first two years because of the suicide exclusion clause. The Professor was a bright guy; he isn't likely to have overlooked that key provision.

"Was he having business difficulties or any type of financial problems?" I asked.

Coleman moved his head from side to side. "You can rule that out. The business was privately owned and operated—no stockholder or

management hassles to worry about—and had been around longer than General Electric. Plus he'd just landed some big contracts with the state of Georgia school system to provide chicken nuggets to the school system."

I scratched my head. "The Professor wouldn't appear to fit a suicide's profile, to be sure."

My cheap pen, lifted from the post office, had run out of ink and I scrounged through my drawer for another before saying, "Let's move on to the three survivors."

Coleman looked more relaxed now, probably because he would be talking about the living rather than the dead. "I'll start with Dominick 'Dog' Duquesne. Anticipating your next question, he's called Dog because you never caught him without a puppy under his arm or on a leash. There were plenty of orphaned pooches in 'Nam that he adopted to save'em from the stew pot. Now, he raises pedigreed dogs for sale and trains guide dogs for the Seeing Eye Foundation. He lives in San Arroyo Seco, a desert town eighty miles northwest of L.A."

"What kind of soldier was he?"

"He was a typical grunt. Being drafted, he complained about everything: the heat, the humidity, the cold in February, wearing the same underwear and socks for days on end, the food, the weight of the packs we had to carry, and having to clean his rifle every day—the M-16s were prone to jam if you didn't. He also griped about the pay—$320 a month plus $60 hazardous duty pay for a PFC— and his hometown girlfriend whom he suspected of infidelity.

"But when shit happened, he was as solid as they come. He could empty the M-16 clips from his bandolier faster than anyone I'd ever seen. I think he hoped everyone would run out of ammo at the same time so that fighting could be conducted via fixed bayonets."

"How about the second survivor?"

Coleman got up and stretched his back before reseating himself and replying. "That's Lester 'Lifer' Luckingbill from Swamp Cabbage, Kentucky."

"Lifer sounds like he may have been the elder statesman for the younger recruits."

"That he was," Coleman confirmed with obvious admiration and respect in his voice. "Lifer was a career soldier on his last tour of duty before retiring with thirty years under his belt. He saw beaucoup action in the Korean War, picking up a cluster of purple hearts and silver stars in the process. He first came to 'Nam in '63 as an advisor but switched over to the infantry in '65 at the first sign of troop build-up—it was more fun killing people yourself than telling other people how to do it."

"What was his rank?"

"He was a First Shirt—Sergeant First Class—three times. Every time he made E7 rank, he'd get drunk and start a fight at the NCO Club, or ignore a direct order, which earned him a reduction in rank and forfeiture of pay and allowances. He always worked his way back up and actually enjoyed a successful military career.

"Lifer was respected by everybody, including the senior officers, for a couple of reasons. First, he looked the part: GI crew cut, square head, granite jaw, and more scars than a nervous butcher. He always had a cigar in his mouth, even when eating. He would push his stogie to the left side of his mouth with his tongue and funnel C rations through the right side. Secondly, he had more time in country and more combat experience than anybody else. You ignored his advice at your own peril as his platoon leaders quickly learned. He'd earned so many medals and service ribbons that he'd run out of display space on his dress uniform jacket."

"It sounds like anyone planning to kill him will have his hands full. It's hard to imagine him dying at the hands of any man born of woman. What's he up to these days?"

"He's drawing his pension from the Army and collecting disability payments from social security. That income, plus what his wife brings in from the textile mill, is enough to keep the roof over their head and put food on the table. These days, he spends his time suckin' shine from a Mason Fruit Jar on the front porch swing during the day and going out to his barn with a shotgun and flashlight at night to shoot rats."

"Shooting rats—an unusual hobby wouldn't you say?"

"Not for Lifer. He picked up the practice during his first tour of duty when he and some ARVNs came across a Montagnard village in

the Central Highlands right after the NVA had left. They'd found men and women whose ankles and elbows had been smashed with rifle butts and rocks and rendered immobile. They'd been dragged to a river bank by the communist troops and left to die. When Lifer got there, the villagers, many still alive, were being eaten by river rats the size of armadillos. Ever since that experience, Lifer has had this vigilante thing for rats."

I was going to offer a quip about Mickey and Minnie having to get a restraining order on Lifer but wisely let it pass. "You mentioned a disability."

"He left a couple of toes in a minefield explosion in a rice paddy outside of Tam Ky. He still gets around on his own two legs, though."

"I believe that brings us to you, Mr. Coleman."

"The least interesting of the bunch," he said modestly. "I was born and raised in Glendale and attended grad school at USC until I ran out of money. The draft board moved faster than the student loan company so I wound up in Army greens. After I got out of the service, I became a recluse, smoking a little weed in the mornings, sleeping in the afternoons, and stocking a department store at nights. After a year, I woke up and escaped this funk when my brother-in-law suggested we open a barbecue place. We started 'Pig and Pit' in Woodland Hills and have added three more restaurants in the past two years."

"What was your nickname; I know you must have had one."

"Yeah." Coleman chuckled. "I was afraid you'd get around to that. It's Porky."

"Like Petunia's boyfriend in the comic strip?"

"One and the same."

"How did you warrant that particular moniker?"

"From my looks—I'm short, bald, plain-faced, snub-nosed, and overweight as you can see."

"Physically, I could be your evil twin, Mr. Coleman. Uncle Sam tried to draft me also, but I was classified 4-F because of my poor vision." Instinctively, I adjusted my black, horn-rimmed glasses on my nose. I always felt guilty when talking to a veteran since I'd managed to avoid military service. Maybe by helping Coleman, I could repay the debt I felt I owed to those who had valiantly served our country.

"If that concludes the bios of your squad, I'll need the addresses and home and work telephone numbers for yourself and the other two surviving members. I'd like the same info for the closest next-of-kin of your five deceased comrades."

"I anticipated your request; it's all here," Coleman said, pushing a sheet of paper across the desk.

"When did the eight men in your squad leave Vietnam and get out of the service?"

"As I mentioned, I left 'Nam in '70. The others were out by '72. Most of us were draftees and left 'Nam and got out of the Army at the same time. The policy in effect then was if you served your year in 'Nam—and had less than six months left in the Army when you returned to the states—you'd be released from active duty since it wasn't worthwhile to reassign you to an active unit or the reserves."

"That makes sense. All right, Mr. Coleman, let's assume for the moment that these deaths aren't accidents or suicides. I'll admit that it's unlikely that in an eight-man control group, five men would die under such questionable and mysterious circumstances. However, other than the fact that all five decedents were in the same Army outfit, and served in Vietnam at the same time, what makes you think these deaths were triggered by something that happened there?"

Coleman nodded as if he had been expecting this question. "Each of the victims was found by the CSIs to have a Vietnam Service Medal ribbon bar pinned to his clothing."

"Ribbon bar?"

"Each soldier who served in 'Nam, Cambodia, Laos, or Thailand from '65 to '73 received a ribbon bar. It's yellow with vertical wide green stripes at both ends and three thinner red stripes in the middle. They're normally worn on a military uniform."

I straightened up in my chair and asked excitedly, "Are these ribbon bars available for public purchase?"

"Yeah, they can be found in any pawn shop, military supply store or surplus depot."

"I'll grant you that the ribbon bars suggest a common perpetrator, but it leads to the next question: how do you know the causes of deaths are attributable to something that happened in Vietnam?"

"There's more," Coleman said quietly. There was another long pause, but I didn't mind because I sensed that we were finally getting to the heart of the matter.

"In early '70, we returned to Chu Lai, after several rough months in the bush, for a couple of days of rest and relaxation. Our squad cleaned up and went over to the club to have a few beers and listen to Led Zeppelin. There was a Vietnamese girl at the bar, a hot little number named Mai Tai, who we started talking to. We were happy with this development since all the Donut Dollies were ugly as sin, and Mai Tai was well-known around base camp for her version of the Soldiers and Sailors Relief Act, if you know what I mean. What made it even better was that she was looking real good that night. She was wearing a slinky, tight-fitting little number that left little to the imagination. After a few drinks at the bar, the eleven of us moved to a table and continued to work on her, buying round after round until none of us was feeling any pain. When the club closed, they threw us out and we staggered back with Mai Tai to our hootch. When we got there, she did a little striptease and dance which put everybody in the mood. She was obviously looking for more than drunken conversation so we decided to pull a train and played rock-paper-scissors to determine humping order. She was clearly enjoying the non-stop sex until the seventh or eighth guy. Then, all of a sudden, her sexual defense system kicked in and she started to resist. We were surprised by this sudden change in behavior and thought she was putting on an act, but we were too far along to change plans. In retrospect—in the the light of day and with clear minds—we realized that she wanted us to stop. But, with our bellies full of booze and no sex in weeks, we weren't in a frame of mind to abort the mission once underway. To make a long story short, what started out as a friendly orgy blew up in our faces."

I was numbed by his confession. Coleman looked as sorrowful as any man I've ever seen.

"We all knew it was wrong not because of the way it started, but the way it ended. Not a day's gone by that we haven't regretted it. We went into denial at first, rationalizing that we shouldn't be left holding the bag just because she suddenly wanted the show to end. We reasoned that a group grope we organized wasn't that much worse than her

pulling tricks on her own. Looking back, we were trying to trivialize rape to the point where we could live with it. After all, she'd lead us on and once the genie's out of the bottle, it's a bitch to put it back in.

"Each year at the reunion we struggle to avoid discussing it, but it always manifests itself in some form or another—a heavy ache in your heart or the lingering pain of remorse in your conscience that flairs up whenever it's provoked by memory. We were further haunted by the knowledge that Mai Tai used to help out at the 27th surgical hospital and had, so to speak, helped save lives and provide medical and spiritual comfort to casualties. In effect, we had committed an outrage against an ally, which was unconscionable no matter how you slice it. In the U.S., we would have stopped at the first sign of resistance since that's a country with laws and penalties for breaking those laws. In 'Nam, we learned that once you got in the boonies, different rules applied—you could create your own laws. We came to learn that the first casualty in 'Nam was not a body bag sent home, but the loss of innocence, decency, and humanity."

Coleman slumped in his chair and I gave him some time to complete his soul-searching before saying, "Funny thing about evil; it has the amazing capacity to reinvent itself. It can be at a different time, in a different place, and in a different form, but it never misses an opportunity to disable a conscience and steal a soul." Then I prompted, "What happened next?"

"Mai Tai reported us to the Judge Advocate General's office and we were slapped with a rape charge. They held a hearing and determined there was enough evidence to proceed with a court-martial, so we were locked up and provided with legal counsel."

"What was the verdict?"

Coleman wiped his brow. "The court-martial was never held."

"Why not?" I asked, puzzled by this unexpected response.

"The day before the court-martial was to have convened, Mai Tai committed suicide. We couldn't believe it. Why go through all that hassle to claim a crime was committed and then take your own life. The JAG office deliberated for a few days and then dropped the charges for lack of a plaintiff who could present testimony and be cross-examined."

"Was Mai Tai her real name?"

"Her first name was Mai and her middle name started with a 'T' so everyone called her Mai Tai to keep it simple. We never knew her last name.

"While the cancellation of the court-martial removed the immediate legal problem, we continued to be haunted by the fact that while Mai Tai had been a willing accomplice in the act early on, she was ultimately forced against her will, and we've lived with that every day of our lives. We never intended to do anything that could have fatal consequences; it's just that a good time got out of hand. We'd give anything if the events of that night could be changed, but while God might have the capacity for forgiveness, He's not much into do-overs."

I scratched my head. "Talk about a gray area. This case is full of ethical snares and legal traps. On one hand, the legal resolution could be construed as being a bit generous for the defendants," I confessed. "Even though Mai Tai was dead, she *had* filed charges claiming to have been the victim of a crime, and that allegation deserves some justice even if it's just a fair and impartial review of the facts of the case. Her suicide could be interpreted as the result of the shame she had been caused by the sexual violence. On the other hand, her suicide may have been prompted by personal remorse for her own responsibility and conduct leading to the rape."

I sighed, my head swimming in confusion at all the conflicting nuances of this act. "I'm not a jurist, but I suppose it can be argued either way. I'm not very good with legal math, so I wonder how you pursue an act that is mostly consensual and partly forced."

Coleman appeared to be as lost as I in the legal and moral wasteland. "I should mention that there was another event that had a far-reaching impact upon the operation and conduct of the war—one which I believe had a direct bearing on the decision to dismiss our court-martial."

"What was that?" I asked, piqued by my curiosity.

"The My Lai Massacre. In March of the previous year, one of our sister Americal brigades—Charlie Company, 20th Infantry, 11th brigade to be exact—received some intelligence that NLF—National Liberation Front—guerrillas had massed and established a stronghold in My Lai 4, a little hamlet in the My Song village complex in Quang Ngai Province.

Quang Ngai had been the location of some of the fiercest fighting in the war, further intensified by the Tet Offensive, which began in January of ’68. Prepped for revenge, the troops were told to attack the village and kill any NLF soldiers, supporters, and sympathizers they encountered. However, the only people found by the 11th brigade were 350 to 500 women, children, and old men who they herded together and shot. Civilians always bear the brunt of war, and they received even less protection in this conflict.”

“Duly noted, but what is this leading to?”

“The Americal first attempted to cover up the fiasco at My Lai, but when the truth leaked out, and the press and public got word of the massacre of unarmed and non-resisting people, the shit hit the fan. The Americal brass circled the wagons and hunkered down in contain-and-control mode. I believe our court-martial was dropped because they didn’t want the distraction of a comparatively minor offense.”

“You’re probably right. I can’t help but reword something Reinhold Niebuhr once said: man’s capacity for good makes justice possible, but man’s inclination to evil makes justice necessary. Please forgive my foray into Protestant theology.

“So you think that the incident with Mai Tai is the reason for the vendetta being experienced by your squad members?”

Coleman paused again and nodded. “Without a doubt. We think we’re being systemically wiped out by someone seeking revenge for the rape and death of Mai Tai.”

I let this soak in. “Let’s look at possible suspects. Does Mai Tai have any close relatives who, motivated by the idea that justice delayed is justice denied, might want to see her violation avenged?”

“We don’t know anything about her family, but it’s highly unlikely. After the NVA took control of the country, many South Vietnamese were butchered, or stripped of their possessions and forced to become slave labor. Even if she had any relatives who survived the takeover of the country, they wouldn’t likely be in a position to come after us.”

“I suppose not. Where was Mai Tai from?”

“She was from Saigon and took some nurses’ training there. She relocated to Chu Lai in the late ’60’s and volunteered to work with the medical core of the Americal Division. She was Eurasian—part

Vietnamese and part French—which probably accounted for her good looks."

I nodded and tapped my pen on the desk in frustration. "Her family history will be hard, if not impossible, to track at this point in time. The North Vietnamese won't respond to a records request even if those records existed. Our only chance is the documentation that had been assembled in preparation for the court-martial. The JAG's office may still have it.

"Looking at another possible source, did she have an ardent admirer in the military who may have sought revenge on her behalf?"

Coleman shrugged. "As I said, she reputedly had a long line of lovers, but I don't know if any one of them was smitten enough to become a self-appointed avenger. Most guys can tell the difference between a one-night stand and eternal love. But I gotta admit that these murders are so well-organized and carried out, they suggest someone with a military background and training."

"My thoughts exactly. I'm thinking someone with Special Forces expertise; not some pimply-faced lad from backwaters America who falls in love with his first sexual conquest."

I leaned back in my chair and looked at my notes. "You've provided four common denominators: the deceased were members of the same military organization in the same place and at the same time, all died from causes that are at the very least suspicious, all had a Vietnam service bar attached to their corpses, and they all participated in the same sexual attack upon a foreign national. Other than the service bars and the rape, what else connects the deaths of your squad members to their service in Vietnam?"

Coleman squirmed and fidgeted some more, which usually indicated that something of importance was to follow. "Just one thing: each man was killed the same time each year."

I jerked upright in my chair again and scribbled hurriedly. "Now we're getting somewhere! That strongly suggests serial killer involvement. What's the common day of death?"

"All five were killed on the first day of Tet, Vietnam's Lunar New Year."

"When is that?"

Coleman reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, which he handed to me. "It varies each year, but it will always fall between January 21 and February 19."

I scanned the paper, which contained the following:

1977KosFebruary 18
1978ShankFebruary 7
1979One NutJanuary 28
1980M&MFebruary 16
1981ProfessorFebruary 5
1982?????January 25
1983?????February 13
1984?????February 2

"When a buddy didn't show up at the reunion, we'd call him. If he was dead, we got the dates of death from his next-of-kin. We then compared the dates of death to look for a pattern, but the only common element was that they occurred in the first two months of the year. As you might suspect, the Professor was the one who figured it out after M&M was killed."

"That's a nice piece of detective work by the Professor," I complimented. "Few people could have made that connection other than a Vietnam vet or someone immersed in the culture of Southeast Asia . . . or," I added as an afterthought, "a contract killer hired by someone to whom the dates and methods of murder have importance."

Coleman shifted his weight in his chair and dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. "That's a pretty broad universe of people—and it's all well and good, Mr. McFadden—but the most important piece of information is the one we don't know: which one of us is next?"

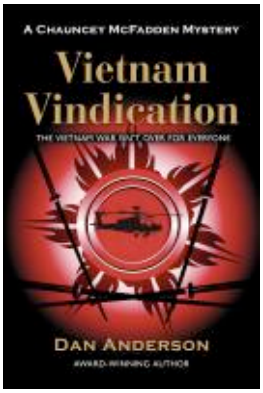
I nodded understandingly. "I appreciate your sense of urgency. This appears to be the work of a precise, organized killer. If so, the key to breaking the code of his methodology may be right here in front of us. Stretch your legs and give me a few minutes to work with your list."

I reviewed my notes and the obituary list Coleman had given me. He again walked to the window of my office to look down on the nearly deserted streets below. When I finished, I spun around in my

chair for the second time and pulled out the encyclopedia and read the entry under "Tet". In a few minutes, I added a couple of lines and a fourth column to the sheet of paper Coleman had given me.

By now, Coleman was pacing back and forth, his anxiety falling somewhere between that of an expectant father and a condemned man waiting for a last-minute reprieve from the governor. Finally reaching the end of his patience, he turned to me and asked, "Have you figured anything out yet?"

"I think so, Mr. Coleman. I can tell you when you're going to die."



For the past five years, a vicious assassin has methodically murdered members of an Army unit who served in Vietnam on the first day of Tet. Chauncey McFadden, Los Angeles PI, is asked to help stop this brutal vendetta before it claims the lives of the remaining squad members. Despite Chauncey's best efforts, the body count soars as victims are dispatched in ritualistic ways by a killer as enigmatic as he is lethal.

Vietnam Vindication