THREE

IN A DATA DAZE

Howard was having one hell of a time trying to open the padlock on the front door of his modern 74-feet-long mobile home. "Uh, well, you just gotta hit it sharply in the right spot and it'll pop right open. Simple. Nothing to it. One of the skills we learned in the Special Forces. Watch."

Five sweaty minutes later, he was still whacking away at the damn thing with a rock. I slipped away and found a side window I could crawl through. Howard was *still* banging away at the lock when I opened the door and let him in. A normal human being would've been embarrassed. But he wasn't, not in the least. I was though, for him. After all, this was our first real day together.

Howard's mobile home was set on 132 acres about seven miles down the South County road from Study Butte, which was a few miles northeast of the Terlingua Ghostown. He said he had bulldozed the last three miles himself to get to the location. Since then a few other houses had sprouted up along his section of the road. Terlingua Creek wound through the back of his property. He called the area Churchville, a name I never heard anyone else ever use..

"This is my first love," Howard said, walking over to a trail-worn saddle resting on a sawhorse in the middle of the living room. A lariat was looped around the horn. He ran his hand lovingly over the saddle's smooth dark brown leather and handed the lariat to me. "This is the same kind of rope we use in Special Forces for rappelling."

While Howard went into the kitchen to turn on the roof-mounted swamp cooler, I looked around the place. A large television console took up most of one wall. I hadn't seen a satellite dish outside so I knew the set was useless. On the blond paneled wall to the right of the console was a 10-by-12 picture of a youthful Howard in full paratrooper regalia. Some kind of official army picture. Alongside Howard's head, in the background, a tiny paratrooper

floated down through the clouds. I was looking at the picture when he came back.

"Welcome home, bro," Howard said. "If you don't make yourself at home, you ain't home."

Howard's kind words broke down my stoic acceptance of my lonely existence on the road. I felt a warm rush of affection for him. I wasn't alone anymore. Since Sallie had died I hadn't been in a house for months; and here was soft armchairs, two big couches, even electricity and running water. Compared to most of the folks in the area, Howard was rich and living in a palace.

"That's my Soldier of the Year picture in the 82nd Airborne in 1956," Howard said. "One man out of 16,000 makes it a year. Winning that honor came with a choice. You could either accept a commission to lieutenant or teach the plebes at West Point. I chose West Point. A year that worked a hardship on my wife and me because the army barely reimbursed me for my expenses. I felt sorry for the plebes. They had to sit ramrod straight, hands resting on their thighs just so and so, and call me sir. I lectured thousands of them . . . I'm thinking about the auditorium. They can't take notes. It's all in their heads. I drummed a lesson in them one time they'd never forget. But they did. Most of them.

"'You have a hole seven foot six inches deep and eight inches in diameter," I started out. "The flagpole is thirty feet high and five inches in diameter. The flagpole is aluminum and weighs one hundred and sixty pounds. The wind is five miles per hour coming from the northeast. The ambient temperature is 80 degrees. Answers tomorrow. You're dismissed.'

"The poor guys spent all night figuring that one out. You oughta heard the answers I got.

"'Sir,' one of them raised his hand the next day. 'The trigonometric calculations of the azimuth properties, in conjunction with the metallic components of the aluminum, blah blah blah.'

"I cut them short after a half dozen answers like that.

"'What you do, gentlemen, you say, Sergeant, put the flagpole in the hole.'"

I grinned to myself and thought, "What are you gonna think, Howard, when *I* tell you how I feel about officers."

Howard got two beers from the refrigerator and we sat down at his kitchen table. Through the big alcove window I saw Leon Mountain, a small mountain, rising out of Terlingua Creek a few hundred yards to the north. To the west, dramatically dominating the mesquite- and creosote-covered Chihuahua Desert, was the towering blue mass of the Chisos Mountains forty miles away in Big Bend National Park.

"This is one of the prettiest views in Terlingua, Howard," I said, sipping my beer. "It's magnificent. Actually awesome. Mystical."

"Well, it's no accident," Howard said. "I chose this spot so I can look at the Chisos. It doesn't hurt to have beauty while you sit and drink." "

We sat there and just looked at the Chisos Mountains for a while, neither of us talking. Cool air from the ceiling vent flowed down over us. I was content. I was off the road. I was *home*. Then out of the silence Howard began telling a story about his youth. A master storyteller, he knew there had to be a beginning.

- - -

The early Spaniards heard eerie noises in the wild canyons up there, so they called the mountains Chisos, or ghosts. The old-timers said it was just the Indians spooking the invaders. Indians were experts at psychological warfare. I learned a bunch studying them. In fact, I patterned myself after them. That's my old stomping grounds up there before they made it a national park.

Thirteen years old, alone with only three packhorses and my weapons, I drove cattle through those high forested mountains. The ranchers would let their cattle roam wild up there to fatten them up and then send someone to get them. One tough job rounding up mavericks trying to rip your guts out with their horns, trying to keep the herd together and fighting off predators. I drove them down out of the mountains and a hundred miles north. No compass. Just pick out a landmark, a butte or a mesa, an unusual rock formation, and head for it. Check the sun. Pick out another landmark. Head for it. I never saw another living soul the whole way. And I made the ranch, covered with dust and battered as a tumbleweed.

"Fine job, boy," W.L. Foster, the ranch owner, said. He had taken a chance on the "kid." as they called me.

"Well, I ran out of cigarettes so I thought I'd just head here," I said, a disarming grin on my tan weathered face. The ranch hands crowded around me, giving me cigarettes and whiskey.

"Eh, he just lucky," Ray, one of the hands, smirked, taking up where he'd left off two months ago.

I looked up at Ray coldly, not saying a word. Until finally, "Why don't you shut your mouth, Ray. You said I couldn't. I said I could. The herd is here. Look at 'em. More'n we counted on."

Ray had a rifle cradled in his arms and made a great show of quaking in his boots. "Now, runt, don't get riled up. You might piss in your pants. Like me." His gums curled back, exposing his crackled yellow teeth, and he cackled "*He! he! he!"* and "Your ma wouldn't like that, eh?"

"Ray, I think you better leave him alone," Mr. Foster drawled. He was all slow motion, but he was authority.

"Aw, I weren't gonna hurt him."

"I wasn't thinking that. I don't want him killing you. While you're flapping your jaws, he's sizing you up."

And I was. Size didn't impress me. I had a hogleg on my hip. Real big bullets. Draw and fire. Sudden like. Never give the sonofabitch a chance. He started it.

Ray suddenly decided he was awful hungry and skedaddled over to the bunkhouse to wash up for the noon meal.

- - -

Remembering, Howard chuckled. "Mr. Foster treated me like a man. Like a son. So I got the herd through for him. Wouldn't let him down. And Ray. He was just an ignorant bully. Yeah, I was gonna kill him. I was scared shitless, so I became fearless. And I had all these grown men watching me. Seven or eight. Pride, you know. When I stop talking that's the time you better start ducking . . . You might call that my growing-up manhood days. I really never had a childhood. I was grown up and working at nine . . . ten. Ray was right about one thing though. I was a runt. Still am."

"How tall are you, Howard?"

“Five feet eight. I've got this fierce pride. It's . . . you wouldn't believe the trouble . . ." He stopped and chuckled at some private memory. "It comes with being little. I know that. And I understand it. All the psychological implications. And I use it. A driving force. Remember, I'm a master of psychological warfare. One of my specialties. You wouldn't believe all the trouble General Westmoreland and Colonel Roger Pezzelle got me out of."

"I never thought of you as being small, Howard. It just never entered my mind, one way or the other."

"Well . . . " Howard said awkwardly. "Dick, let me go get my attache case. No sense in putting it off." But he sat there a while longer before finally forcing himself up.

"This is my life in here," Howard said, his hand resting down inside the worn black attache case. We were sitting on the short-nape beige carpet in his living room.

What was in there? What was I going to see? I wondered.

Howard's eyes looked searchingly into mine. "I have a monkey on my back you would not believe." His next words broke with a desperate urgency, as if he were drowning and I was the only one on the bank with a life preserver. "Maybe you can tell me how to get rid of it." He went on quickly. I was to ask him anything and he'd tell me. He didn't intend to jeopardize people that were still active or reveal national secrets that were still ongoing, or didn't need to be told. "Other than that my life is an open book. Only people worried about their reputations hide things. I know who I am. I'm letting the dirty laundry hang out on the line for everybody to see. It's about time the country knew. Let them carry the monkey awhile. Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

Without knowing what Howard had done, not having to know, I knew what he had to do. Knew it intuitively. He had to forgive himself. But how do you forgive yourself?

"Come over here, m'honey," Sallie said, "and I'll show you how to take care of the checkbook and write out the bills.” Doctor McDonald gave her little hope of surviving the laser operations for her massive benign brain tumor. Restless, not knowing what to do with myself, I went to the casino that night before her first operation. She survived it only to go into a week-long comma a few days later and pass away. I swore then and there that I'd. never play poker again. When the life insurance money came, I went back to the casinos like a zombie and lost $16,000 out of the $24,000. And . . . and that's just a part of it. What kind of

man lets his wife make the living for them while he's supposed to be writing.

"Howard, you know you don't have to tell me everything. There are some things in everybody's life that—"

"No, Dick. It don't work that way. If we're going to do this, we're going all the way. The nightmares won't go away, not if I live to a thousand years. I only sleep four hours a night." His hand came out of the attache case and he extended it to me, palm up. "You take the monkey." The hand was *empty*. I didn't know what to do or say. I couldn't just reach out and . . .

Howard's face was etched in anguish. "Here," he insisted, making a cup now with both hands. "Take it." He leaned in closer to me. It defied all logic, *but I could actually see a small phantasmal creature forming there.* "You tell me how to get rid of it."

"I'll try," I said, not knowing how but wanting to try for his sake. And mine. If he could forgive himself then maybe I could forgive myself, too. I knew his sins must be far, far greater than mine, but that was little comfort.

"When will you let me know?"

"I'll let you know when we finish the book."

"Okay."

"This is my green beret. My original one," Howard said, reaching down into the attache case and taking it out. "It's wool and scratchy and uncomfortable. It doesn't have two dollars worth of material in it. But the things people will go through to wear one." He put the beret on and cocked it to one side. "One of my friends, Walter Shumake, was personally selected by Jacqueline Kennedy to attend the funeral of John Kennedy. As they were lowering Kennedy into the ground, Walter took off his green beret, his original one, and put it on top of the casket. That meant a bunch."

Howard set the beret aside and began taking other things out of the attache case, giving a short explanation or story for each one.

There was a cassette tape of a rowdy SOG party at CCC hosted by Howard honoring out Pete Nimtz's lost recon team.

Sheaves of citations and awards. One of them a letter in Thai to Howard from the King of Thailand thanking him for training the Thai Special forces. "A foreigner can't own property there, but the king made a special dispensation for me," Howard explained.

Two clippings from the Pacific Stars & Stripes that had to do with an unidentified Special Forces adviser: Howard. The clipping had a grainy snapshot of him. The caption under it read: "An American Special Forces adviser helping his Montagnard troops build up their bunkers in their Kontum compound in anticipation of heavy attacks." Howard put the clippings aside. "That was strictly forbidden, taking pictures of us, but some of those reporters were damn persistent and cagey."

A hundred or so war snapshots of Howard in black and white and in color. When I saw the one of him squatting, holding the tin coffee cup, a machine gun in his lap, my heart raced.

"There's our bookjacket cover," I cried.

Howard grunted. "I never took any pictures of myself. People just gave these to me."

Some of them showed gory North Vietnamese bodies that made me shudder. It took him several hours just to tell the stories behind the snapshots. I never had a better time.

Then there was the technical papers, documents and such.

Howard got up once, went to the back bedroom and came back carrying a large clear plastic bag. He unzipped the bag and took out a pair of what I took to be black lounging pajamas. But then I saw they were too heavy for that.

"This was made especially for me by my tribesmen. Look at this intricate weave," Howard said, holding up the "pajamas," pointing out the fine red and gold threads woven into the flawlessly worked designs. "And they called these people savages. They were once a high civilization now fallen." He went on some more about their myths and beliefs. "I could walk into any Montagnard village in Southeast Asia wearing this outfit, and with this sash around my waist"—he let the slash slide across the palm of his hand—"I was immediately accepted."

I asked Howard once, "I'm confused. You were CIA, right? But I-I thought you were a Green Beret? I mean . . . what . . . how? I don't understand." That was why I had put "Green Beret/CIA operative" on my rough bookjacket cover. I was fudging. I didn't know what I was doing.

"All right . . . let me explain. I worked inside the Special Forces in a supersecret organization that even the regular SFs know nothing about. To this day they still don't know *nada*. Nothing. The organization is called SOG. Special Operations Group. We were the elite of the elite. Out of 630 teams in Vietnam, I was just one of six team leaders that survived. I took over Fred Zabitosky's team, R,T, Maine when he got all shot up. Zabitosky received the Congressional Medal of Honor. R.T. means reconnaissance team. As much as I respected Zabitosky, as much as I respected the other team leaders, they hadn't got out of kindergarten. I was one of the very few that saw it through from the beginning to end. Every mission was mission impossible."

Howard's left eyebrow raised. "I told you this before, didn't I?"

"I think so. Maybe. I forget," I mumbled,

"SOG is what my story is all about, Dick. And this is where it gets very heavy. The story has never been told. We—now I'm talking about SOG—are recruited by the CIA to do their dirty work around the world. In effect, we're mercenaries. I'm talking about sergeants only. Five thousand dollars a month. Sometimes more depending on the mission. That's in addition to our regular army pay. Officers, with rare exceptions, never ran missions. Only sergeants ran missions. We became anything the Company wanted. Diplomats, embassy people, missionaries, officers, Peace Corps. Anything. Let your imagination run wild, and it won't be half wild enough. SOG sergeants, specifically team leaders like myself, are the most highly skilled people the world has ever known. I should say unknown. Famous but unknown. The KGB and Spetsnaz Special Forces are pussycats in comparison. The ironic part about it, Russia, China, France, everybody but the American public knows what we do. I call myself a man of many hats. Got it?"

"Well, I didn't know that. I didn't think the army— Yeah, I got it. I think. But what about

the . . . ?" I stopped. My head was spinning. Vastly overloaded with so much data, I couldn't remember anything right after I heard it. I hadn't brought my tape recorder.

"Yes? Ask," Howard said. He lit a Marlboro off the old one and looked at me through the hazy blue smoke.

"You said you spent twelve—thirteen years? In Vietnam with the Special Forces?" *Southeast Asia,* Howard corrected me. "But didn't you say you were in the 173rd for two years in Vietnam? That's paratroopers, right?" I shook my head, flustered. "Give me one of those damn cigarettes," I said, taking up the habit again, which was never much of a habit to begin with. "I'll stop tomorrow."

"Are you sure you want one of these? Okay." He shook a Marlboro out of the hardcover pack and lit it for me with his BIC. "That's one thing I will not give up. I could give up my beer. Even whiskey. But not my cigarettes. Okay. I can see where you're confused. Hell, I'm confused," Howard laughed. "It's a confusing story.

"Specific: I'm operating out of CCC—that's Command and Control Central—our supersecret base in Kontum, South Vietnam. And this'll further confuse you. A highway runs right down the middle of the camp. And I could be jerked out of there in a moment's notice to go to, say, Bum Fuck, Egypt, to start an insurrection. Or put down one. Or I could spend eight minutes on the beach in Lebanon ahead of a Marine invasion force, which I did. The spotter plane I was in got shot up and the pilot made an emergency landing on the beach. I'm right in the middle of two opposing forces. The Marines in their landing crafts and the Lebanese army approaching from the town. I lit a cigarette and was casually smoking it when the Marines came charging ashore.

"'What took you jarheads so long?' I said, in welcome.

"'*Who the hell are you?'* they cried.

"'Nobody.' I was always *nobody*.

"Then I'd be back in Kontum a week later. More likely, I'd go to Paris or Bangkok or wherever and spend a few weeks partying with the cuties. In the case of the 173rd, I went there two times. The last time to straighten out their reconnaissance platoon. They were killing the gooks instead of bringing them back for intelligence. In other words, I was an international troubleshooter. Got it?"

"I guess so." I was giggling like I was drunk. "What did you say SOG stood for?"

Howard told me again. Then said, "Take a break."

Stifling my giggling, I adopted a somber tone. "I don't like to talk about it, Howard. But, well, I'm a few years older than you. I hope you don't take this wrong. You think *you* had it rough? In the navy during the Korean War I fought the Battle of the Riviera. The enemy wore . . . "—I broke out giggling again—"*wore* . . . *wore* bikinis." Gasping, I began choking violently on the fiery cigarette smoke that went down the wrong pipe. Sucking the smoke back in instead of exhaling it isn't the smartest thing to do. Howard scrambled out of his chair to help me, but I waved him off and finished my little tale. "Tha-that's where they sent me. France and the Mediterranean."

"Good duty," Howard said dryly.

"It was better than being tied up at the Destroyer Piers in Norfolk, Virginia, for two years like we did after that cruise," I finished lamely.

My best joke and it went over like a *lead balloon.* Speaking of cliches, I never heard Howard use one in any of his stories; none that I was aware of anyway. That's no human. If there are any in here, they must be mine.

Howard stood in the back bedroom doorway, hands spread out to the sides in a gesture that was both proud and self-effacing. He grimaced and shrugged. "Here I am in all my radiant glory." He had on his green beret and olive drab Special Forces jacket, which hung down over his blue Levis. Four rows of colored ribbons decorated both sides of the jacket.

If all those hippies and doubters down at the Study Butte store only knew, I thought angrily.

I got up to take a closer look. Howard pointed to his master parachutist wings. "The rest of them are Whoopee buttons. I was there buttons," he said, in a few words dismissing a lifetime of accomplishments and awards.

"How many medals do you have, Howard?"

Among the memorabilia on the carpet I'd seen eight or nine Silver Stars, five or six Bronze Stars, several Purple Hearts, and a Distinguished Service Cross. Except for the Purple Hearts, I didn't know what I was looking at. And when I asked, he would never explain them to me, always turning to something else as if they weren't worth discussing.

"I think about forty-eight," Howard said. "That's just the ones I received in the mail for the most part." The puzzled look on my face made him go on. "It was a funny war, Dick. Medals. I know . . . Everybody wants to know about medals. They're just Whoopee buttons." He ran a finger across a row of buttons on the jacket. "These are not all. I've got a couple of shoe boxes full of them. If I tacked them all on, I'd have to throw them over my shoulder and they'd hang down to my butt. I'd look like a Russian general. And that's tacky."

Howard went to the refrigerator. "You want a beer?" I nodded and he sat back down at the kitchen table with the beers. He looked out the window at the far-off Chisos Mountains for a few moments before going on.

"I'd go into the admin office at CCC and look through the filing cabinets and tear up any awards they were putting me in for. So they sent them to me through the mail when I wasn't around. If you made a Silver Star the officer over you, who never set foot out of his air-conditioned office, would put himself in for the Distinguished Service Cross, the next grade higher. He was 'in charge of the operation,' right. So I told my men we're not going to make any more medals for officers. My men would moan and bitch, 'But, Pappy . . . ' But what were we there for? Medals? Or get the job done. We were professionals.

"I know this sounds crazy, Dick, but that's the way it was. That was my hard policy. No more medals for officers. Though I would put my men in for awards if they deserved it . . . I had some officers quit me because of that. They'd transfer out.

"Medal fever. It went on all over Vietnam, especially toward the end. You better get the medals while you can, boy. This war won't last forever. It got so bad that some officers were

putting themselves in for the Congressional Medal of Honor, for chrissake. In one case, at our camp, me and the other team leaders exposed an officer who had put himself up for a CMH. We wouldn't let it be hushed up and he had to resign his commission. He was making up stories with the connivance of a team leader. Good men are bleeding and dying in the weeds and they're making up stories. Naturally the team leader was going to get the Distinguished Service Cross for his part, the nation's second highest award for valor. We got rid of that guy, too. But we don't like to talk about that."

Howard looked down at his beer and made a sour face. "I've got to have something stronger. I'm going out drinking. Let me hitch a ride with you back to Study Butte. We'll take up again tomorrow, bro."

"All right. We made a good start," I said. "And I'm damn sure gonna bring my tape recorder with me tomorrow."

"Yeah."