

## EXCERPT ONE

The platoon was being ambushed.

He knew there were three bullets coming. The first took away a small piece of his shoulder about where a needle would be inserted to give him a shot. It tore off the skin and maybe a sixteenth of an inch of muscle. A profound sting told him that it wasn't serious. They'd said that you couldn't feel the serious ones right at first—too much trauma for the brain to handle.

The next and nearly simultaneous two bullets didn't hit him, although the second one tore off a piece of his fatigue shirt an inch above the hole made by the bullet that took away a chunk of his shoulder. The third one missed by five inches, but he heard it snap by. Only veins had been torn open—no arteries.

He'd known all three of the bullets were coming. As he dived into the sand behind the two-foot-high sand-and-bamboo berm that thinly separated terraced rice paddies, he wondered if he'd known because he had heard the noise of the three rounds exploding out of the machine gun ... That must be it. No, that couldn't be the reason. Bullets travel faster than the speed of sound. He wondered how he could have known. Just in time, he had juked to his left and dived for the protection of the berm.

It was a good thing that he was here, he thought. He laughed out loud as he realized what an absurd thought that was. But the short laugh couldn't be heard above the noise of the instant battle.

The platoon was frantically firing in return, and grenades were exploding everywhere. Machine guns and assault rifles fired on full automatic. Grenade launchers chimed in with their eardrum-hurting thunks. Both sides were laying down as much fire as they could. The air was full of screaming metal.

He was still for a second as his body ended its slide from the momentum of its forward dive. Although his helmet was securely attached to his head by the chin strap, when the lip of the front edge hit the sand, it lowered to the bridge of his nose and cut into it. The sharp pain made his eyes water instantly.

Or were the tears that were blinding him caused by the sand in his eyes? He considered the fact that he was dangerously ignorant and inexperienced. How could he have forgotten to close his eyes when his face hit the ground?

He felt the back of his right hand wiping the sand and blood from his eyes and knew that he'd rubbed too hard because his eyes stung, but not as

bad as his shoulder did. He blinked three times, and the sand came into focus four inches beneath his face as blood dripped into it from the tip of his nose, the plasma vanishing into the hot sand as the red cells coagulated and gelled, already darkening from their initial bright red.

Sand. Each grain was different, he noticed. He'd never really looked at sand up close before. And the grains were not just different shapes and sizes but different colors. Vietnam sand wasn't simply muddy gray-tan. Besides the grays and blacks, there were greens and browns and blues and opaque-clears and reds and pinks and yellows and rusts. There was a whole world of shapes and colors in the sand. Little rocks are what they were. Why had he never noticed sand before?

He had to concentrate, but there was no use looking at anything else but the sand. You can't see metal moving that fast anyway.

He felt it again! Or did he hear it? What was it? It was a signal. He knew that much about it as he rolled to his left again, over, over, over, three times. He knew that it was important to get away from that particular space. Someone who saw him dive there intended to kill him, he knew. He could feel it! He could feel the enemy's rage. And fear. Yes. They were afraid too.

This time he knew to close his eyes as the berm where he had been hiding jolted and then began disintegrating from the force of the machine gun bullets hitting it from the other side. He turned his face away as the tiny sand missiles tore into his face and hands and his ripped right shoulder, which was stinging even more now. But it was not because of the sand flying into it, he knew. The nerve endings, so suddenly exposed to the air and torn into shredded pieces, were awakening to tell him that he'd been hurt by something moving so fast that it had momentarily deadened many of the little sensors and damaged his body enough that it needed to be attended to.

*Don't think about the pain!* he thought. *Think about what's important! What should I do to stay alive a little longer?*

Clutching the wound with his left hand helped the pain a little. Not so much air could get to the nerve endings so violently assaulted. Shredded nerves don't like being exposed to air. Water's better. Blood's best. Just get it out of the air by putting it back together. *No, lidocaine is best*, he remembered. Deaden it, and then sew it up. That's what it wanted. *Slow down! God, please slow things down! Give me time to think of what to do! Shouldn't I be doing something right now? Maybe not. Just hang on. Hang on. I'm a medic, not infantry.*