

A Killer Season – First Pages

Chapter 1

The hole in the jerry can was more oval than round, as if the bullet had struck at an angle. Coll Nolan studied it with his finger as he lay behind the object that may have saved his life, and might need to again.

He was amazed at how many people were trying to kill him, but he'd made plans for his life that didn't feature dying. More than two dozen men had fired death at him that day, and all of them got to visit their ancestors sooner than most young men plan. Plans don't always work out for average folks, but Coll Nolan was no average person. An average person would've been dead by now.

All he wanted out of life was to be able to bet on baseball, so what was he doing shot up in Southeast Asia where survival was a far more pressing need? *Good question*, he thought, but, should he survive, a more worrisome one kept spinning in his head: What changes and challenges would be awaiting him back home?

"You hit anywhere important?" Coll said to the Marine next to him. The man immediately checked his belly and groin.

"Nope, my stuff's okay."

"They got us about everywhere else."

"Only hurts when I breathe."

"You can breathe?"

The battle between the advancing North Vietnamese Army and the U. S. Marines had raged on for almost an hour, but the heaviest exchange of gunfire was beginning to subside as the sun dipped to the horizon. Lifeless bodies and the crawling dead were strewn everywhere across the wide grassy expanse. Coll and the Marine near him seemed to be the last men standing. They were both separated from their units, wounded, bloody, and exhausted. Coll's weary eyes searched the area for a suitable place to retreat, patch themselves up, and try to make it through the oncoming night. He scanned the smoke-laden terrain where he stood. Nowhere his vision took him offered protection.

Coll plodded south for several minutes, and came upon a muddy swale near the village of Thanh Phu, about five miles northeast of Saigon. It wasn't a fortified bunker, but at its edge were a few trees and tall shrubs for cover. He grabbed his buddy by the arm and limped over to the spot with him in tow, where they welcomed the chance to sit down. The smells of burning palms and spent explosives filled the humid air. He stared out at the killing field from his hunkered down position at the base of a hibiscus bush and thought about the number of the enemy he'd killed. It was a large number. Way more than John Wayne had whacked in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and it saddened him to think about it, but they were trying their best to kill him, so he'd done his duty and stopped them.

He looked down at himself and saw blood everywhere on his battle uniform, and he could feel sharp pains in his leg and shoulder. The noises of staccato gunfire, explosions, and approaching

helicopters still thundered in the distance and in his head. Crouched next to him was the other young Marine in camouflage face makeup with deep-set, tired eyes. Coll had dragged him out of a losing firefight after the guy had spent what was left of his energy in a hand-to-hand match-up with a tough NVA soldier, who took a long time to kill. Coll was dog-tired, but grateful for a chance to catch his breath and for the moment of non-combat.

Coll's eyes closed and the weariness made his real time thoughts ebb in and out, but he was fully aware of one thing: the man next to him was a fellow marine. He thought that if he had to die today, it was a comfort to know that another Marine would be there with him.

"I'm sorry... I'm fading a bit on you," Coll said.

"You take it easy, buddy. You saved my ass out there and Eddie Menning don't forget things like that. What's your name, sergeant?"

"Coll Nolan."

Eddie shifted around to better face Coll and slapped his hands on his helmet.

"You're shittin' me. I'm sittin' here with Gunnery Sergeant Collin Nolan? Jesus, everybody knows about you, gyrene," Eddie said.

"Who says crap like that?"

"Every guy in the Corps. You got enough medals comin' to weigh you to the ground."

"Horseshit."

"You hang in there, baby. Help's on the way. Hear 'em, sarge? Hear them big gyros?" Eddie said. "They're coming for us, sugar. You just stay cool."

The sounds of the approaching evac helicopters grew louder. Most of them were heading for the U. S. Embassy in Saigon, but one broke from the rest and headed toward a landing spot less than eighty meters from where Coll and Eddie sat.

"Run and catch a lift out, Eddie. I'll be okay."

"I ain't running nowhere, baby. They either save us both or they leave us."

The helicopter's exhaust bursts became deafening as it settled on the wildly whipping grass.

"I think our ride to the prom is here," Eddie shouted. "Choppers scare the crap out of me, but if it can get us out of here, I'm in."

Eddie jumped up in jubilation, but Coll saw something far more dangerous than a helicopter ride heading for them, a mere baseball pitch away.

Chapter 2

Two Viet Cong soldiers clambered out from behind the remains of a hut in the dense kudzu less than twenty meters west, as the horizon rose to hide the last sliver of the sun. Coll saw the black-clad, VC soldiers raise AK-47 assault rifles toward Eddie, who spotted them in time to dive to the ground. Eddie aimed his M-16 in their direction, but when he pulled the trigger nothing happened.

Two shots rang out. The Viet Cong soldiers stared at the two marines for a moment, then crumbled to the ground. Eddie checked himself for fresh wounds. Finding none, he snapped his head to Coll, who sat with his .45 caliber pistol perched on his knee, smoke rising from its barrel.

“You got them bad boys, partner. We don’t let no black pajamas in Dodge.”

A pair of shadowed figures rushed toward the two marines in the twilight. Before Eddie could draw his sidearm, they were on top of him, restraining him from getting his pistol out and doing them any damage. Eddie’s eyes filled with terror, but Coll realized who they were and lowered his .45. One of the two U.S. Army corpsmen shined a flashlight in their own faces to assuage the men’s fear. One medic was a black man, the other was white.

“We’re the good guys, marine,” the white corpsman said.

“Jesus wept,” Eddie said.

“We’re going to put you in our brand new Rolls Royce limo out there with that big propeller on top and get you gents out of here,” the white corpsman said.

Both medics helped Eddie to his feet. The white corpsman then hefted Coll up, put Coll’s arm over his shoulder and helped get him walking to the Bell UH-1E helicopter. Eddie and the black corpsman led the way across the open field.

“Take care of him, doc. He’s got a lot of medals coming. That’s the Audie Murphy of the seventies,” Eddie yelled back to the corpsman supporting Coll.

“What’s his name?” the black corpsman asked.

“Sergeant Coll Nolan, to you and me, but the NVA call him *con ác mong*.”

“*Con ác mong*?” the corpsman said.

“Means nightmare,” Eddie said.

“Shut up and move, Eddie,” Coll said.

“A bad motor scooter, eh?” the black corpsman said and glanced at Coll.

“He just shot up about thirty belligerents out there in that field, and he saved my butt today,” Eddie said. “I’ll tell you something, doc, if he was after me, I’d shoot myself.”

“Do you know you’re wounded, marine?”

“Your ass. They missed me.”

“No, *your* ass. It’s bleeding,” the black corpsman said.

Eddie contorted and checked his behind. It was covered in red. He patted himself on the area of the wound.

“Sonofabitch. My own damn juice. Popped me in the fuckin’ can. I didn’t even feel it. Must’ve ricocheted off something,” Eddie said.

“I heard you jarheads were butt-tough, but I’d still put a couple of Band-Aids on that,” the black corpsman said.

“You got them nice flesh-colored ones?”

“Right on, brother.”

The black corpsman pulled up the sleeve on his forearm to reveal a "flesh-colored" Band-Aid, apparently intended for Caucasian application, on his very dark-complected wrist. “See? One color fits all,” he said with a grin.

“You know, truthfully, I ain’t never seen nobody yet with skin that sick-pink color. But gimme a couple anyways,”

The four men boarded the helicopter and took off into the night sky.

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“Got a little rough out there today,” Eddie said, over the copter noise.

“Saigon’s ready to fall,” the black corpsman said. “We’re pulling people out.”

“Shit,” Eddie said.

“You’ll be somewhere safe soon,” the white corpsman said.

Coll somehow knew that their helicopter was not just rescuing them and taking them to temporary safety, it was taking them out of there for good. After eighteen brutal months, Coll felt an eerie feeling in his gut that he and Eddie were going home.

“Eddie, do you think the Orioles won today?” Coll asked.

Eddie looked puzzled.

“The Orioles? The baseball Orioles? Yeah, sure,” Eddie said. “What did you expect with that nitwit Steinbrenner runnin’ the show? They beat my slacker Yankees 26 to 3. Palmer pitched. Killed their ass. Brooks Robinson hit two grand slams. They was bombing the Yanks so bad they tried to find that dickhead Billy Martin to pinch hit.”

“Where’d you hear all that crap?”

“Got one of them shortwave pocket radios. Picks up everything but money and chicks.”

Coll brightened for a moment. “You’re full of bravo sierra,” Coll said, then looked at the date on his wristwatch. “My God, it’s the end of April. The season’s running away from me. What I wouldn’t give to place a bet on a game back in Baltimore.”

“What I wouldn’t give to place one at Aqueduct,” Eddie said. “Mainly because I’d be in New York and not in this shakin’ sonofabitch.”

“We both need to spend some time in a Marinehospital before we do much,” Coll said testing the tenderness of the blood-soaked wound on his thigh.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Can you believe one of those monkeys got me in the can?”

“Be thankful that’s all he got.”

“You got plans when you get home?”

“Yeah. I want to be the biggest money winner in the history of Las Vegas.”

“At what? Poker?”

“Baseball.”

“Baseball. You are nuts, you know?”

“Maybe. We’ll see.”

“What’re your plans for the near future,” Eddie asked. “For money now. Not for when you’re broke in Vegas from betting on the Orioles.”

“Like for work?”

“No, for bank heists. Yeah, like work.”

“Haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Well, look, when you heal up and get back on your feet, give me a call. Now I want you to understand that I don’t do this for just any old combat hero, but since you pulled my bacon out of the fire, I’m gonna make an exception and put you onto a sweet paying job that’ll beat the beans out of doin’ actual work.”

“Does it have to do with a bank heist?”

“Keep your voice down. We don’t want every jamoke on this chopper wantin’ in,” Eddie said, looking around like his head was on a lazy susan. “Look, my uncle is a big diamond merchant, among other things he does to make money and, brother, let me tell you, he makes a ton of it.”

“Why would he want me to work for him?” Coll said.

“Because you’re my buddy and he loves me like a son. Trust me, I’ll get you something cushy to do for decent bread.”

“How do I call you?”

“Look up Vandermeer Diamond Brokers in Manhattan. They’ll tell you how to get in touch with me.”

“Okay, but I was really up for boosting a couple of banks,” Coll said.

“No joking around, hear? Call me. I mean it.”

Coll had contemplated going home someday, but he wondered to what. He had his dreams and his list of future aims like most young men, but occupationally the only thing he knew how to do was soldiering. What he yearned to do, and had a modicum of talent for, was figuring out professional baseball game outcomes. And, in the American job market, he wasn’t sure there was a huge demand for that limited skill.

They were going home, and they’d had heard about the anti-war movement and the angry protests. His sister had written him about returning soldiers being spat on as they got off the planes. He had fought the good fight and done his best to honor his country and his uniform. Now he was going home.

Coll had never feared the enemy as much as he did that thought.

Chapter 3

Finding work in Baltimore was tough. At least work above minimum wage that didn’t require entry level cooking. He found that a soldier returning from Vietnam received little or no praise outside of family, and many of one’s own relatives harbored bad attitudes about the justification of war in general. It wasn’t restricted to the hippies and the love-thy-neighbor Christians either. Coll saw it becoming the mindset of the majority of 1970s America, weary of seeing the body counts and the flag-draped caskets, which the media played up every day on television and with bold headlines in the newspapers.

Coll Nolan soon realized that he wasn't going to be able to build up the bank he wanted to take to Las Vegas to pursue his dream. Not in Baltimore, anyway.

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Coll was impressed by the bustling activity at JFK after he deplaned from the U. S. Navy transport, and took a moment to survey the open concourse below from the upper level of the terminal.

Eddie Menning intercepted Coll as he stepped off the escalator lugging a jumbo suitcase and a military duffel bag slung from his shoulder

“Was the chicken cordon bleu in first class as good as it used to be?” Eddie asked.

“Tasted a lot like peanuts,” Coll said.

“I'll speak to the chef.”

Coll and Eddie came out one of the door gangs of the terminal and hit a wall of steamy July air and city exhaust fumes. They queued up and got a Yellow Cab.

“Where to?” the cabbie said.

“Where's the nearest bar?” Eddie asked.

“There's a nice place I know in Queens,” the driver said.

“Maybe somewhere a little closer,” Eddie said.

“Got one in a few blocks, but the one in Queens is nicer.”

“We'll take the one that ain't so nice,” Eddie said.

A short ride later, the cab pulled to the curb in front of a narrow doorway jammed between two storefronts. A paint-chipped, neon sign hung out from the building with the succinct wording: “BAR.” The rusty chains supporting the sign might have anchored the Mayflower. A filthy window held a sun-parched, corrugated cut-out of a faded, Canadian Club whiskey bottle about six times life size. Several hundred insects and one brown mouse had made the window their final resting place beneath a bare, flickering fluorescent tube.

It was a basic kind of place, nothing fancy, booze and a bartender, all that was required. The mahogany bar surface had a patina and smell like it had been mildew-rag wiped for decades. Varnish long gone, it had been swabbed down to expose a raised grain you could feel. The air fresheners hanging from the fan cords had lost their battle with the overwhelming atmosphere of stale beer and ancient cigarette smoke that may have gone back to Sir Walter Raleigh.

Coll and Eddie sat at the end of the bar and ordered beers. Eddie tossed a twenty down on the bar while Coll gave the well-worn place the once-over.

“I bet the one in Queens was nicer,” Coll said.

“Yeah, and woulda cost us a hundred bucks to get to.”

The bartender set up their drinks, took the money, and stopped to stack some spotty bar glasses on his way to the cash register.

Eddie looked Coll over.

“Last time I saw you you looked like you'd been in a war,” Eddie said.

“A couple of months in Ocean City and I clean up nice. Looks like they pasted your fanny back together okay.”

“Being back in civilization fixes a lot of things.”

“You visit the family?”

“Just my mom,” Coll said. “Dad passed.”

“I saw your name on the discharge list. Where’d you get that middle name: *Valerio*?”

“My mom’s side. Italian.”

“You make good meatballs?”

Coll frowned at the comment.

“When are we supposed to meet your uncle?”

“Saturday. His place, around ten.”

“*His* place?”

“Owns a bar and restaurant in the city.”

“Is it a *nice* place?” Coll asked, studying at the antique ceiling fans, and taking in the outdated TV above the bar, layered with years of brown smoke tar.

Coll felt Eddie’s stern stare. The bartender placed the change from the twenty on the bar and moved several feet down to the television set and turned it on. Coll waited until he was out of earshot and turned to Eddie.

“I don’t want this to sound ungrateful, but I have to ask,” Coll said.

“Ask what?”

“This uncle of yours. Is he, you know, connected?”

“Connected? What?”

“To the... mob?” Coll said.

“What? For Christ’s sake, he owns a restaurant and operates an import business. That don’t make him Al Capone.”

“Okay. I don’t want to get involved with anything illegal.”

“Look, he’s a proud Dutch-American who loves that his decorated nephew and hero buddy are goin’ to work for him. Everything he does is above-board. He’s my mother’s brother, for crying out loud. *He* should be concerned about *you* --- half mick and half paisan.”

“All right, already. So we’ll see him next week. What’s the job?”

“Manager for one of his import houses. That’d be me. And he needs a driver to go around town to his job sites. He hates to drive in the city, and his regular guy married some chick and’s movin’ to Kansas. *Kansas*. Can you believe it? Whatever happens in *Kansas*? Oh, yeah, I remember now: *Nothin’*.”

“I don’t feature being a chauffeur the rest of my life.”

“Bartel Vandermeer pays his people very well. So you might wanna rethink those plans after your first paycheck. And it’s not only chaufferin’. He brings in foreign cars you’ll get to drive every month. Very nice rides guys like you and me don’t get to wheel around in often.”

Coll took a sip of his beer.

“I’ll try it,” Coll said. “We’ll see.”

“Like we got skills to peddle to the highest bidder. ‘What is it that you boys can do?’ Well, we can sleep in a rice paddy, shit on a dead run, and shoot coconuts out of palm trees with an M-16. That’ll oughta rate a corner office on Wall Street.”

“You left out getting three straight weeks out of a pair of socks.”

“Is this that baseball thing?” Eddie said. “This why nothing’s a good enough life for you?”

“It’s not all about money. If I had a million dollars I wouldn’t know what to do with it except bet on ball games, but winning money is how success is measured.”

“Damned if I wouldn’t know what to do with it,” Eddie said. “So what’s your big plan?”

“I want to be the biggest money winner in Las Vegas history. And I’m going to do it betting on baseball.”

“Oh, man, here we go again,” Eddie said.

“Eddie, you like playing the horses. You bet on maybe seven of nine races, you win on three. When I bet baseball it’s like betting on the horses every day, every race, for seven straight months. And I’ll win at an eighty percent clip.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind. Nobody does that. Nobody wins like that. It don’t happen, Coll.”

“If it was easy, anybody could do it.”

“And I suppose you ain’t just anybody,” Eddie said.

“Some people can run a mile in under four minutes. Some guys can climb Mount Everest, or win gold medals at the Olympics. No one achieves anything believing they can’t. I believe I can do what I say I can.”

Eddie shook his head, took a pull on his beer, and stared at Coll. Coll knew the look. It was the one you get when telling someone you could sail around the world in a sixteen-foot boat, or go to the moon in a homemade rocket, or eat a hundred hot dogs in ten minutes. He knew Eddie’s look said: *Who wins real money on baseball games?* -- Nobody.

Chapter 4

There were people Coll had read about who had an aura of such authority that just hearing of their exploits caused one to be a bit awestruck. There were men like the legendary Marine Corps General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, who was the most decorated U. S. Marine in history, and the recipient of five Navy Crosses. There were giant people like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Babe Ruth. He remembered meeting President Gerald Ford in a medal presentation and recalled how the hair had bristled on the back of his neck at the ceremony. During a political rally in Atlanta he had shaken the hand of Coretta King and had never forgotten the electricity of that moment. There was something about these people with their huge accomplishments and their historical place in the world that made most folks at once humble and even obedient.

Bartel Vandermeer was not one of them, but he was close.

He was tall, tan, with razor-sharp features, and sported a full head of ash blond hair that belonged in a L'Oreal ad. His clothes were from the finest haberdasheries, even though Coll believed Bartel could wear a muumuu and still be equally respected. His eyes were pale blue, cold, and piercing when he stared at those in his presence, which he did often. Bartel was a paternal man around whom those in his employ did what they were told.

Coll and Eddie worked for almost two years for Vandermeer, who was a large player in the diamond district of New York and in the international market. Eddie had been right. The man paid his help well. So well, in fact, that Coll's plans to make baseball betting his full-time profession got put on hold. He placed a few weekly bets through a local bookmaker and let that be enough to satisfy his drive to be the greatest baseball gambler ever. He rationalized that if he socked away a lot of his money now, when the time to go west arrived, he'd have enough to last him. Being the greatest Vegas money-winner was going to require a healthy pile of seed funds.

New cars arrived at the port every few weeks and Coll drove some of them to the people he presumed had bought them. Vandermeer's empire wasn't solely dependent on South African diamonds and Amsterdam jewel auctions. He also had his hand in foreign cars purchased directly from their factories in several major European cities. Coll wasn't sure about the reason for Vandermeer's foreign car interests, but he knew enough to sense that Bartel was a major player wherever he had investments. Coll might be able to out-bet him in baseball, but he damn-sure wouldn't play *Monopoly* with the man with real money.

Coll had only seen the diamond side of the business once, when he had to take a car to West 47th Street where Eddie worked. The diamond district there was a booming place and inside Eddie's building Coll saw more diamonds than he thought existed in the world. He described it as the place where blings came to show off, and where the rich came to shell out.

Coll had reached a comfort level in New York that temporarily deterred him from going for his life's goal: to go to Las Vegas and bet on every major league baseball game, every day, through the conclusion of the World Series. He was only twenty-three and there was plenty of time for that, he figured. For now, he was loving life. He had an easy job, got paid great money, and was working for a man who liked and welcomed Vietnam vets at a time when a large segment of America treated soldiers returning home like murderers. What would be wrong with staying a while, building up a bundle of cash, and heading west later? In Eddie's estimation: Nothin'.

One thing, though, bothered Coll a little. Each time he went to the port to pick up the car he was to drive to its new owner or dealer, it was always one particular car among the football field of cars in that same shipment. He had to procure a single, special car with a particular vehicle identification number. It struck him as peculiar, but he figured the car with that VIN must have included certain extras, and perhaps a specific paint combination custom-ordered by the buyer, even though many other models at the port appeared to be identical. He allayed his curiosity and went about the job of delivering the cars without much more thought.

On one particular delivery to a dealer where he had often driven cars, he stopped to have lunch at a diner en route. When he returned to the car, he noticed that the something below the rocker panel beneath the driver's door was hanging down. Coll dropped onto his back and scrunched under

the car enough to tug on the loose piece and re-align its fasteners with holes in the frame. While it was off, a thin stream of a pale powdery substance fell to the asphalt of the parking lot. It had come from one of the holes in the frame where the fasteners had pulled out. He pushed the part back flush against the frame and checked to assure it was securely in place.

Coll swept some of the powder onto piece of paper, folded it into a small envelope, and tucked it in his jacket pocket. The car was a red Ferrari 308 GTS, imported directly from Maranello, Italy.

He hoped what was in his makeshift packet was pizza dough flour.

