

FEBRUARY, 1984

CHAPTER ONE

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Pain's a bitch.

The doctor at the VA called it phantom pain, nerve trauma that would eventually go away. Yeah, right. Frank was twelve years and counting.

This morning, he woke to a cold, sluggish fog that had his foot throbbing before he even stood. His only relief was to shift his weight to his toes and keep pressure off the heel. Of course, the gimp-walk didn't do much for his appearance. People already shied away from his long hair and shaggy beard. The shuffling limp and tortured expression convinced onlookers that he was a derelict.

They should have seen him twelve years ago at the VA. The pain was so intense all he could do was lie in bed, groaning and thrashing, his hospital gown soaked in sweat. Once he was up and around, he'd rolled down the hallway in his wheelchair, ranting at other Vietnam veterans with missing legs and arms. His rage seemed to ease his pain, but like a drug, he needed more.

So he started ramming into other wheelchairs, then chasing after the mobile, bruising their ankles with his metal foot-plates.

On his feet, Frank was a regular fighting machine, wielding a crutch like a club, or throwing sucker punches when least expected. It never occurred to him that those guys were battling their own pain.

In desperation, he pinned a doctor to the wall with his own clipboard, threatening to decapitate him if he didn't up Frank's morphine dosage. An orderly put him out on the street.

Then the pain really took hold. The dribble of morphine still in his system wore off while he slouched in the back of a city bus headed for downtown Atlanta. When he threw up in the aisle, the driver tossed him off. Unable to stand, much less walk, Frank crawled into an alleyway and passed out.

A wino rummaging through a trashcan woke him. Frank offered the bum some dough for his bottle of Thunderbird, and slugged the wine down in one long gulp. From there it was all downhill.

Frank shook off the memories, and tipped his face up to feel the warm sun. The day felt more like April than February. And now that the fog had burned off, his foot had stopped pulsing. He eased a little more weight onto his right heel and strolled down Argonne Avenue a good hour ahead of the city's garbage trucks.

Spotting a drink can in the gutter, Frank shook the dead leaves off before dropping the can into the black garbage bag slung over his shoulder. This would be a good day to hit Piedmont Park. The Midtown crowd had probably flocked there for lunch, clutching their brown bags and sodas.

Frank paused at a cardboard box of junk next to a garbage can. Digging past chipped dishes and frayed towels, Frank found a pair of Converse sneakers splattered with green paint. Elevens. He sat on the curb and tried the left one on. Perfect. Ripping off a corner of the box, he folded the cardboard and wedged it into the heel of the right shoe to fill the space where half of his foot was missing.

He'd had a pair of shoes like these in high school. Chuck Taylor All Stars. He thought he was a real all-star back then, playing basketball, dating one of the cheerleaders. *Candy*. They were so naïve, thinking that their love was the only force in the universe. Then Nixon came up with the lottery.

The night Frank found out he was number sixteen in the draft, he and Candy crawled into the back of his '59 Impala to grind their hips against each other in desperation. She cried the whole time. If he'd known how soon he'd be sweltering in that Godforsaken jungle, or how long he'd lay helpless in that dirt pit waiting to die, he'd have been boohooing right along with her.

With his thumb and index finger, he pinched away the sting in his eyes, then tossed his old shoes into the cardboard box.

Across the street, a staircase lay beached on its side in the front yard of an old Victorian in the middle of renovation. A worker stepped out to the porch and tossed an armload of rotting two-by-fours onto a rubbish heap of chipped drywall, old carpet, rusted pipe, and Little Debbie snack boxes. Frank made a mental note to run by the Piggly Wiggly for a grocery cart.

As he waited at Tenth Street to cross into Piedmont Park, a cab pulled up in front of Taco Mac, down half a block. A smartly dressed woman stepped out of the cab, brushed her skirt smooth and slung her purse over her shoulder.

From out of nowhere, a kid barreled toward the woman, snatched the purse, and tucked it under his arm like a football. Caught off guard, the woman managed to clamp a fist around the strap as it raked down her arm. The kid gave a hard yank; the woman staggered to stay on her feet. Then one of her high heels wobbled and she dropped to her knees. She screamed, still clinging to the purse strap.

Frank expected the cab driver to come to her rescue. When the jerk drove away instead, Frank scanned the front of the restaurant, waiting for someone to come tearing out. No one did. He watched the woman's stockings peel away from her knees as the kid dragged her along the concrete.

*Crap.*

"Hey!" Frank yelled as he drew up to his full six-two height, and took a step toward the ruckus. "Let go!"

He hoped his tough guy act would either scare the kid or freak out the woman, but they both clung to that purse like pit bulls. Just as Frank broke into a run to rescue the woman, the kid flicked open a knife and cut the strap. The woman tumbled forward. The kid lurched into Frank and the impact knocked his sack of drink cans loose. They clanged to the sidewalk.

For a split second, the kid cringed at the noise, but then his arm started slashing through the air and Frank couldn't get out of the way fast enough. The first swipe of the knife barely grazed Frank's green Army jacket, but the back swing caught him on the chin. The contact with flesh seemed to bolster the kid's confidence. He lunged at Frank, aiming for his gut.

With his forearm, Frank knocked the kid's hand to the side then drove a fist into the punk's soft belly, doubling him over. The stupid kid never saw it coming. Probably figured Frank for just another stumbling wino.

While the kid gasped for breath, Frank raised both arms to finish the punk off with a Bobo Brazil elbow drop, but the rumble of voices distracted him.

A crowd had gathered around the woman. A man helped her to her feet, while a girl handed the woman a tissue to dab her bloody knees. Another woman gapped at Frank in horror, like *he* was the bad guy. Somebody suggested calling the police, and suddenly everyone was looking at Frank.

*Oh sure. It's always the homeless guy.*

Instead of the body slam, Frank jerked the knife out of the kid's hand. "Drop the purse."

The kid let the bag fall before dashing to the corner and out of sight.

When Frank hobbled toward the six or so people huddled around the woman, they gasped and took a collective step back. The tissue girl actually screamed. Geez, did they think he was suddenly going to turn into a psycho killer? Did they not just see him take the knife away from that punk? He let the weapon clank to the sidewalk.

Holding out the purse, he waited for the woman to take it. When she didn't, he tossed it at her feet. What had he expected? Gratitude?

A siren screamed over on Peachtree. Oh, no. He wasn't going to spend the night in the Atlanta jail. Some guys appreciated the warm meal and dry bed even if it meant getting knocked around, but not Frank.

Like Quasimodo, he lumbered across the street, through a stand of trees, and into Piedmont Park.

Frank stood over a drinking fountain in the park and splashed water on his chin. Blood drain through the ends of his beard. An old codger edged his way toward a trash barrel nearby.

“That you, Frank?”

Frank glanced up. “Hey, Ben.”

“What happened?”

The old man stepped closer, his eyes jittering in their sockets.

“Nothing,” Frank mumbled.

Ben’s eyes focused long enough to peer into the garbage. With a toothless grin, he pulled a half-eaten burger out of a fast-food bag and shoved it into his mouth.

Frank watched him for a second. “Got a napkin in there?”

The old man fished one out and Frank pressed it against his cut.

At the can bank, the other fellas had already heard about the purse snatching. Big Bob thought Frank had been arrested. Fred G’s version of the story had the woman attacking Frank; the kid wasn’t even in the mix. Other guys paced and licked their dry lips, anxious for their turn at the can bank.

Frank understood their anticipation: that first drink of the day. He’d floated in a drug and booze induced state of bliss the whole time he was in Saigon. It wasn’t until they heaved his swollen, aching body onto a transport plane headed for the States that he started to come down. Then there was hell to pay. He shook. He puked. He slapped at imaginary stinging ants that crawled inside his shirt.

Once he got to the VA, the angels of mercy hooked him up to a morphine drip to take his mind off the chunk of foot they’d removed. Days later, when he finally took a piss on his own, he noticed his withered, purple cock, and saw lingering traces of blood in his urine. Damn whores.

As soon as the sun went down, the night air regained its bite. Frank zipped his jacket up to his raw chin. The front wheel of his grocery cart squeaked as he pushed a load of rotten lumber toward his favorite convenience store. A hooker stood under a street lamp, displaying her wares to drivers that passed. When she saw Frank, she relaxed her pose.

“Evening, Frank,” Diamond called, boosting her double Ds in a tight sweater.

“Hey, Diamond.” Frank parked his buggy against the lamppost. “How you doing?”

“Glittering, honey.” She fluffed her Afro with silver fingernails.

“I see that.”

“Got some sugar for you.” She cocked a leg out and ran her hand up her fishnet stocking.

“I’ll pass tonight. Thanks.”

Those fingernails had raked a good chunk of flesh off Frank’s forearm the first time he met Diamond all those years ago. His GI cut had grown just shaggy enough that she thought he was an Emory student on his way to the Plaza Theater. But when she offered to suck his dick, he flashed-back on those whores in Saigon, and took a swing at Diamond with the pint of Sloe gin he’d been guzzling. He grazed the side of her head, and she came after him, her arms whirling like a windmill.

Frank had tried to retreat but somehow Diamond got a fistful of his hair. Her shiny silver high-heel drew back, and when Frank saw her knee rise up toward his crotch, he cried out, fell to the sidewalk, and curled into a fetal position, clutching his jewels.

She could have laughed at him, or taken advantage of his sniveling by kicking him with said silver shoe. But she knelt and helped him to his feet. “Come here, Sugar. Why don’t you tell Diamond all about it?”

Between slurps of gin, he told her about the horrors of Vietnam, and how he'd been compensating ever since with drugs and alcohol.

"Watch my stuff?" he asked Diamond as he reached for the door handle.

She swiveled her hips. "Like you be watchin' mine."

Inside the deserted convenience store, a clerk perched on a stool watching a small black and white TV. A little old lady in a commercial stepped up to a counter and grumbled, "Where's the beef?" The clerk laughed and tried to mimic the phrase in his heavy accent. He grinned and nodded at Frank for approval.

"Not bad," Frank told him.

"Marlboros, Mr. Frank?" the clerk asked.

"You got it." Frank pulled a fist full of coins and chinked them on the counter. He barely had enough, what with losing his cans in the purse incident.

One of the front wheels on Frank's cart started to shimmy as he cut through the parking lot of the Omni arena. At the railroad tracks, he grunted as he lifted the front wheels over each rail. From the top of a small rise beyond an abandoned warehouse, he saw the flickering light of a campfire. Home.

Four shacks stood in a half-circle around the fire, each constructed from scraps of plywood, corrugated metal, and plastic, held together with bent nails and rope. Wood slapped against wood as he rumbled down the weed-tangled slope.

"Jesus, Frank." Del relaxed his guard and sat down on an overturned milk crate. "We could hear you clear back at the Omni."

Randall left the fading campfire to check out Frank's load. "What you got?"



“Firewood.” Frank handed him some of the shorter pieces. “Looks like I’m right on time.”

A smirk wrinkled Randall’s face. “Heard about the purse snatcher.”

“Is that the one where the cops kicked my butt?”

Randall’s grin widened, exposing a missing tooth. “No, the one where the woman pulled a gun out of the purse after you returned it, and shot you.”

They shared a laugh as they stacked wood on dying embers.

Del grumbled. “When you gonna learn to keep outta other people’s business?”

Ignoring the comment, Frank sat on his own milk crate, pulled a sandwich out of his pocket and took a bite. “Where’s Shorty?” He tossed the wrapper into the fire and watched the plastic shrivel before it burst into flames.

“Gone,” Randall said.

“Where to?” Frank asked.

“Roswell. Gonna look for a *job*.” Del spat out the word.

“No kidding.” Frank reached into another pocket for an apple and took a big bite, juice dribbling into his beard. He sucked the drips.

“I figure he just got too old to drift,” Randall said.

“That’s bullshit,” Del said in a gravelly voice. “I’m sixty and I ain’t about to give up.”

“Yeah, but he was a suit, remember?” Randall said.

Once he’d eaten the apple, Frank twizzled the stem between his fingers. “I think he got tired.”

“Tired of what?” Del asked. “Cruising from Techwood to Courtland and back every day?”

“No. Tired of being cold, tired of being hungry—“

Randall nodded. “Tired of being scared.”

“Scared? What the hell did he have to be scared of?” Del grumbled.

“It ain’t like it used to be.” Randall tipped his head toward the skyline. “Those young guys, they’re mad. They don’t like being homeless. Think everybody owes ‘em something.”

“It’s getting scary all right,” Frank said as he pulled out his Marlboros and flipped up the lid. “Want one?”

Del rose on bandy legs and reached across Randall to snatch a cigarette. He lit it off a piece of burning wood, and inhaled deeply. His cough started slow, but picked up steam until he doubled over, gasping for air. With his hands on his knees, he hacked a blob of mucus onto the dirt.

Once his coughing jag passed, Del managed a couple more puffs before he carefully stubbed out the cigarette and slipped it into his pocket. Then he stood close to the fire, warming his wiry body one last time before heading for his shelter. Pulling aside a sheet of heavy plastic, he crawled between two pieces of plywood that leaned on each other, groaning as he dropped to the ground.

Randall tilted his head back and studied the stars as he blew out smoke. “You suppose we ought to keep Shorty’s place open for a while? In case he comes back?”

“I doubt he will,” Frank flicked an ash. “That charity center up in Roswell . . . I hear they got a men’s dorm, free food.”

“Why would they do that?”

“I guess they don’t want anybody roaming the streets.”

Del's cough started up again, rose an octave as it grew more intense, and ended with a shrill gasp for air that echoed through the night. Randall took one last drag from his cigarette and tossed it in the fire before crawling into his own lean-to. He pulled a bent stop sign across the entrance.

Frank flicked his own cigarette into the fire, his fingers tensing. Pain jack-hammered his heel. He hobbled to his shack and stretched out on an old sleeping bag. It was always the quiet of night that brought the worst out in his pain.

First he tried a song. "Well she was just seventeen," he sang through clenched teeth, "you know what I mean." Halfway through the tune, Del hollered at him to shut up.

Years ago, when Randall had seen how much pain Frank was in, he'd suggested thinking of an old girlfriend. Said masturbation was an excellent way of relieving pain. Supposedly, Randall worked at some mental hospital back in the fifties. He'd fought for years to improve the treatment of patients, but a sadistic staff and filthy conditions finally fried his brain. He just walked out the door one day, and had drifted ever since. Frank found it ironic that when the government deinstitutionalized tons of patients in the late sixties, Randall had his hands full with those same schizos, now wandering the streets.

Frank told him it was too painful to jerk off, so Randall came up with the idea of reciting a poem or a song. If that didn't take his mind off the pain, Frank could try running through a difficult task in his head. After taking a couple slow, deep breaths, he mentally pulled the carburetor out of his '59 Impala and cleaned the choke plate and fuel inlet until he fell asleep.