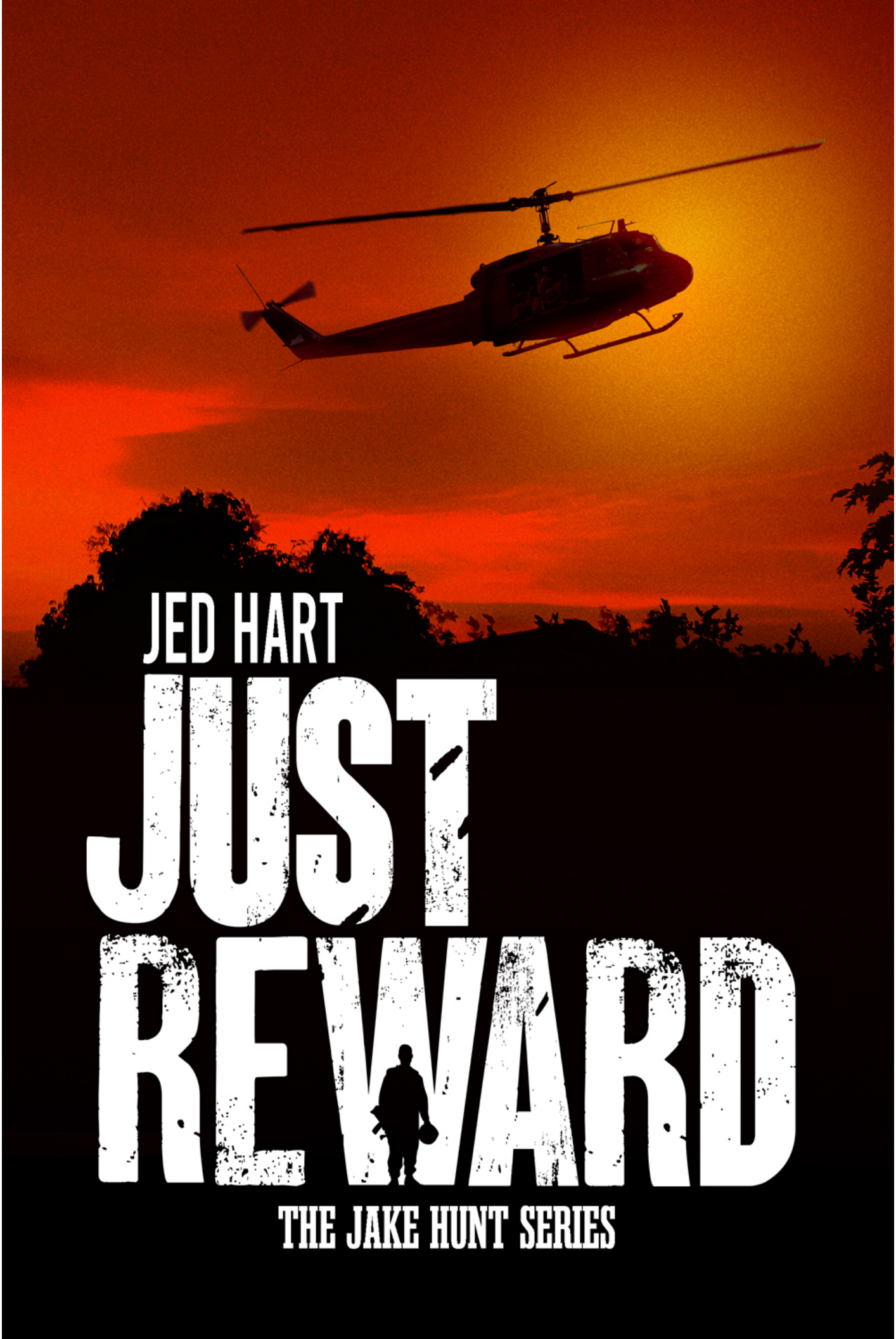

JED HART
JUST
REWARD
THE JAKE HUNT SERIES

Feather Knight Books



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Dedication

Just Reward is dedicated to my comrades-in-arms in the US Army's 135th Assault Helicopter Company and the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam.

These men served their countries with distinction.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1: BEARCAT AND PENSACOLA

March 1967: Bearcat Base Camp, Đồng Nai Province, Republic of South Vietnam

Tony Guselli commanded the mess hall as if it was his private office. He sat at a cheap, four-place table that had been scored by the plates, crockery, firearms and loaded magazines dragged across its surface.

His companion, Jonah Jones, leaned forward. Attentive.

It was 08:00, the breakfast rush long finished. The assault helicopter companies had taken off at 05:00 for their day of combat assaults in the Mekong Delta, and now it was just admin staff and guys on downtime drinking brews. A few *short timers* were mainlining coffee, tending to hangovers.

Bearcat smelt as always of dust, diesel and shit. The latter was burned with diesel in open pits. In the mess hall, that signature stink was combined with the smell of burnt coffee, corn oil, eggs, hash browns and maple pancakes that had been served during the morning. Industrial quantities of food and coffee had been dished out, and that was as it should be. War was an industry.

Guselli was both soldier and businessman, fighting the enemies of freedom one day, providing essential support services the next. A soldier entrepreneur, he liked to think, delivering the lubricant that allowed the moving parts of war to work. Essential oils that dealt with the endless friction created by the army's unreasonable demands on its people. *No lubrication and you could forget moving parts*.

He was a stocky, swarthy man, a tough New Yorker, a petty criminal and hoodlum, a junkyard dog. He craved money and power, and didn't care what he had to do to get either one.

Guselli had joined the Army because driving his own truck in New York wasted long, tedious hours, and earned him a pittance. Armed robbery had become too risky. At first, the Army was the same, poorly paid and dangerous. Then he'd found a line of business for which he was made. Selling drugs.

His patch was Bearcat, a camp northeast of Saigon near the city of Biên Hòa. Here, he did a brisk business selling heroin and marijuana.

'Ya gotta think about it this way, Jonesy,' he said. 'Without us, the whole fuckin' shooting match grinds to a halt. No fucker wants to fight a war for a year with no fuckin' entertainment. I mean, ya can't get ya rocks off shootin' Charlie and cutting fuckin' ears off 24/7 can ya?'

'Nah,' said Jonesy. 'Not 24/7.'

Jonesy was a big-boned Black man, tall and fit with massive shoulders and biceps. He'd traded a life of petty crime in Chicago for the army after a conviction for armed robbery. The judge had offered him the choice of serving his country or fifteen years in Statesville Correctional Centre. Now, on his second tour, he was a trusted dealer and enforcer in Guselli's operation.

'What did ya move yesterday?' Guselli asked.

Jonesy pulled out his red notebook, brow furrowed in concentration. 'Mostly smack,' he said. 'These guys might start on weed, but they graduate to smack in weeks. We moved fifteen bags of smack yesterday. Slow day. Ten bags of weed. Ain't bad but it ain't nothin' to write home about.'

'We ain't gonna be writing home about any of this, Jonesy,' Guselli said firmly.

'Nah, Gus, I was just sayin'.'

'Any new officers buying?'

'Nah,' said Jonesy. 'An' I ain't tryin' ta get close to those fuckers, just like you said. If they come to me, I'll let ya know before doin' business.'

'Okay,' said Guselli, pleased. It took a lot of repetition to get an idea into Jonesy's head, but once it was there, it stayed.

‘We’re gettin’ low,’Jonesy now volunteered. ‘Ya want me to cut the product?’

Guselli settled back in his chair and sipped his coffee.

‘No, Jonesy. We’re high-end providers, not fuckin’ low-end street pushers. We’re the classy end of town, buddy; we’re the guys who deliver quality.’

‘Yeah, Gus,’ said Jonesy. ‘Quality.’

‘Exactly. It’s business, Jonesy, an’ we ain’t gonna fuck with our product or our customers. What about Haden Bracket’s crowd?’

Bracket was a competitor of sorts, a captain, well-integrated into the general staff and, as a result, untouchable. His was a high-end operation supplying heroin for officers and NCOs. Bracket and his tight-knit team didn’t deal with the lower ranks. Guselli’s operation was in the middle ground. Ninety percent of their activity was non-commissioned. That’s where the volume was. Guselli didn’t rock the boat upstream, but out of a well-developed sense of self preservation, he watched Bracket like a hawk. The sneaky fucker would love to take over Guselli’s business. He wouldn’t, for the same reason Guselli couldn’t blast Bracket out of the way. Each of their operations needed top cover, and that came from the same man. That bastard you didn’t want to cross.

Below Guselli’s well-controlled operation, things got ugly. That’s where the guys who couldn’t control their habit lived. They were the suicide candidates, the ones who overdosed. The guys who met the grey death and died with a needle in their arm. Neither Guselli nor Bracket needed that sort of heat, but the Vietnamese dealers didn’t give a shit. They’d sell to anyone.

‘Haden Bracket’s crowd?’Jonesy repeated. This was a question Guselli asked every time Jonesy gave his briefing, and his answer was ready.

‘No change there, Gus,’ Jonesy said. ‘They leave our people alone, and we do the same for them.’

Stability was good for business. Guselli sipped his coffee again, enjoying the moment. *Tomorrow I’ll go on patrol, maybe kill some fuckin’ gooks. I’ll miss this life when it ends.*

Guselli’s day job was with the 16th Infantry Regiment, and he took it seriously, as he did all his commitments. But his primary focus was narcotics because it provided 80 percent of his income.

‘Ya know, Jonesy,’ he said. ‘We only got two responsibilities here, okay? First, we’re salesmen. Gotta move product. Second, we’re the link between the buyers and sellers. We’re in the middle and everyone needs us because we’re the cut out. You know what a cut out is Jonesy?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jonesy, looking worried.

Guselli didn’t press. ‘A cut out is the guy who takes the fall,’ he said. ‘If you get caught, you take the fall for me. If I get caught, I take the fall for the guys upstream. We take the fall and do the time.’

‘Yeah,’ said Jonesy. ‘I know that.’

Gus started thinking about the reason for this morning’s meeting: The relocation of the 135th Assault helicopter company from Blackhorse Camp near Xuân Lộc to Bearcat. New clients on his patch. Clients that brought problems.

‘You hear anything about the 135th?’ Guselli asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Jonesy. ‘Those fuckers are coming next week. They moved it forward.’

That was news. ‘Did the package arrive?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jonesy. ‘He’s in the place.’

‘Has he talked?’

‘Yeah, sure. He’s threatening death and destruction to anyone who’ll listen, but we haven’t softened him up. Just taped him and kept him under guard, like you said. He’s been on base two hours.’

The package was Danny Corban, an E5 Sergeant. He’d been coshed in his Blackhorse hooch early that morning, taped and carried to Bearcat in a Huey that was logged out on a test flight. He was the guy providing narcotics to the 135th.

‘That fucker would bring his business to Bearcat if we let him,’ Gus told Jonesy. ‘No way that happens while I’m still in business.’

‘Nah,’ said Jonesy. ‘No way.’

‘You hear anything about the Aussies?’

Jonesy looked confused. ‘What Aussies?’

Guselli sighed. *The shit he had to put up with.* But he was patient.

‘The 135th is an Experimental Military Unit, an EMU,’ he said. ‘It’s a US Army company with about fifty Australian Navy guys. They’re flying and maintaining just like our guys.’

As if life wasn’t complicated enough.

‘We need an inside man with the Aussies so we can make an effective sales effort.’

‘Yeah,’ said Jonesy.

‘We need to retrain the fuckin’ Aussies,’ Guselli went on. ‘No fucking way the whole of Bearcat is going to change for a few Aussies.’

‘Yeah. You wanna talk to the guy?’ Jonesy asked.

Guselli finished his coffee. ‘Okay, let’s go.’

They took Guselli’s jeep. He wouldn’t refer the approaching problems that came with the 135th to his superiors. He’d solve them himself.

When they got to the bunker on the berm, Danny Corban was on the floor. He was a big white blob of a fellow, about as fat as you could get away with in the US Army. A deskman. *You wouldn’t want to take this fucker on patrol, Charlie would hear him crashing through the jungle a klick away.*

‘Are you the one responsible for what’s happened to me?’ Corban asked Guselli. ‘Do you have any idea who I’m connected to?’

Guselli ignored him and sent the guards out of the room to keep watch. Then he said to Jonesy, ‘Give him a light workout, but make sure he can still talk when you’re finished. About 10 minutes.’

‘Hey, hey, there’s no need for that. Hey, let’s talk for fuck’s sake. Can’t we talk?’

Jonesy was smiling slightly, studying his assignment. Then he started the proceedings by stomping on Corban’s knees and legs. Jonesy was strong and he had Corban bucking and rearing, snorting and squealing like a pig. He knelt on Corban, cut his sleeve off and roughly stuffed it in his mouth. Then he taped the man’s gob shut.

‘Watch he doesn’t throw up,’ said Guselli. He didn’t want the guy drowning in his own vomit.

Jonesy rolled Corban on his side, kneeling beside him, holding him in place with one huge hand while clinically punching him with the other. First

his head, bouncing it off the wooden floor, then neck and kidney, followed by big scything clubs to the stomach and balls.

After eight minutes, Jonesy stood, and used his right boot partly to rest his shoulder and fist, and partly to unleash a volley of kicks at targets of opportunity.

Jonesy had worked up a sweat. Corban's face was a distorted, bloody mask of pain. He tried to scream through his gag. Impossible, so instead he made pig-like squeals and weird pleading mews as the blows landed again and again.

Not for the first time, Guselli thought how useful Jonesy was.

Jonesy spoke little, followed instructions and was hard as granite.

After 10 minutes, Jonesy paused and looked at Guselli. 'Yeah?'

Guselli was enjoying the beating, but there was work to be done. He nodded to Jonesy.

'Take the fuckin' gag off.'

He looked down at Corban, waiting in ominous silence for the sobs and whining to abate.

'Who supplies you, Danny?'

'Ah, fuck,' said Danny. 'If I tell you that, I'm a dead man. You know that.'

'Sure, I know, but if you don't tell me, you're definitely a dead man, and it's going to happen today,' said Guselli.

'Gimme a minute.'

'No.'

Guselli leaned over to his *toolkit,* lifted out long-handled garden loppers and extended the grips to their maximum length for good leverage. They'd been lubricated and slid smoothly to this new setting. Guselli appreciated that. Good tools were a pleasure. While Jonesy held Corban still, he positioned the cutting edges carefully and steadily closed the handles until the blades were ready to cut Danny's left big toe to the bone. Danny screamed again and started pleading, but he also stopped struggling.

Corban was drooling out his words, 'Don't, please don't, I'll fuckin' tell ya, all right? I'll tell everything.' He sobbed, 'please, please, please...'

‘What ya gotta remember,’ said Guselli. ‘Is that the right time to answer a question is straight after it’s been asked.’

He slowly closed the handles as Danny shrieked. The loppers could slice a broom handle, but when the toe came off, it stuck to the blades by a flap of skin. It was logical, Guselli reasoned; the toe wasn’t dry like a broom handle, more wet and stringy, like a thick green sapling. Now he applied the wax.

The guys had prepared a pot of boiling wax on an army-issue camp stove for him, so it was bubbling away when they arrived. As he poured a generous portion of wax over the stump of his toe, Danny screamed the place down. Then he passed out. Guselli decided to take a break and smoke a cigarette until Danny came around.

‘Throw a bucket of water on him,’ he said to Jonesy. ‘Wake the fucker up. I want him talking to me by the time I finish my cigarette.’

He went outside, and when he was done, threw the butt on the ground and stepped on it, then picked it up and put it in a matchbox. He was appalled by the filthy bastards who left their butts lying around as if it wasn’t litter.

Inside, Danny was conscious again and mumbling. ‘Sorry, sorry. Jesus. So fuckin’ sorry. Gimme a chance, please, I’m beggin’ you.’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ Guselli barked. ‘It was just a fucking toe, not your fucking dick. Get over it.’

At the mention of his dick, Danny’s eyes grew wide, and he started shaking.

‘Bruce Pickett,’ he stammered. ‘He’s my Aussie contact. Pickett is Aussie Navy, a petty officer working in the 135th finance and admin group. Sometimes he flies as a gunner. He’s not a user, but he knows who all the junkies are and who’s susceptible. Pickett decides who can be developed as a junkie. Two of the officers got hooked, both pilots, and he negotiated that. He organises distribution, occasionally handles the deals directly. A guy called Croker reports to Pickett. He’s from Chicago. He’s doing most of the deals.’

‘Good, that’s good, Danny.’ Guselli swung the loppers back and forth, close to Danny’s crotch. He poked Danny in the balls. ‘Who’re your suppliers?’

This time there was no hesitation and Danny gave up two small-time dealers in California. Guselli got details of meetings, locations and procedures.

'I can set up meetings,' Danny offered. 'I can bring them to you.'

Guselli looked at him, genuinely mystified. 'Set up meetings? Why the fuck would I trust you to do that, Danny? You just ratted out your whole organisation.'

He nodded at Jonesy. 'Put a couple of bullets in 'im, I'm finished.'

'Wait, wait,' Corban began, 'I can help you. There's more...'

Jonesy had a Russian Makarov PM automatic pistol that fired 9 mm rounds, heavy artillery for a handgun. As Danny pleaded, Jonesy carefully shot him three times in the upper torso. Guselli approved; headshots were messy, and they just wanted to kill the guy, not have to clean brains off the wall.

'Okay,' he said to Jonesy, watching Corban's twitching subside. 'How're you gonna clean this shit up?'

'Same as last time,' said Jonesy. He looked down at Danny's missing toe and neatly waxed stump. 'We'll set him up like he walked into a booby trap on patrol. A claymore will do. We'll bring what's left of him in on a stretcher.'

Sometimes he really wondered about Jonesy. 'The last guy was based at Bearcat, so you brought him back in here, but Corban is based at Blackhorse. It'd look strange if he turned up dead on a stretcher at Bearcat.'

'Yeah,' said Jonesy, his face stern with concentration.

'Fly him back within a couple of klicks of Blackhorse,' Guselli went on. 'Then offload him in a paddy. Make it look like he was killed by *Charlie.* Make sure there's no wax they can find. Got it?'

'Yeah,' said Jonesy. 'I got it.'

'Good,' said Guselli. 'We'll send him home a hero, and his family will get a pension.' He pointed at the floor. 'Make sure you pick up the toe.'

Chapter 2

JAKE HUNT

HMAS Vampire, Coral Sea

For two days, there had been no respite, and there would be none today. The seas were heavy, and as the destroyer *Vampire* buried its bow in the long swell, the hull shuddered like a boxer hit with a body blow. The propellers rose from the water for a few seconds, and twin screws and drive shafts raced and shook, sending a rumbling vibration throughout the vessel. Slowly the bow lifted, hurling tons of white water into the air, and the cycle began again.

Alongside us, *Supply* cruised majestically, 25,000 tonnes compared to our 3000, connected by the gear that transferred fuel to *Vampire*. Replenishment at sea' it was called, RAS for short. That fuel was intended to fire the boilers and feed our turbines all the way to Singapore, but we'd break off the refuel now. Trouble is, that couldn't be done quickly, not ever, and certainly not in this sea. We were slowing, but we wouldn't be stopping or turning, and that was a problem.

The ships complement of officers was 20, but right now we had 19 on board. The first lieutenant, the man we called the *jimmy,* was in the sea. He hadn't been doing anything stupid or heroic on deck, just took his hand off the rail for a second to move forward and a wave lifted him over the side. Simple as that.

'Come on, lads, quick as you can,' I said, as I scrambled up into the cutter. 'Cutter' was an extravagant term for the six-metre boat we were

manning, with its small cuddy cabin amidships, and a single inboard diesel engine. Seaworthy, but tiny. Not built for this sea. It hung on davits on the port side and pitched and rolled with the ship, but that ride would be like ice skating compared to what we'd cop when we dropped into the water.

Able Seaman Clem Turner would handle the lines, lookout and anything engine related aft. At 27, nearly half his life had been in the navy. The captain picked him before anyone else to crew this expedition, and that was okay with me. Clem was an exceptional seaman, and beyond that, we shared an unusual bond. We both yearned for a transfer to the Fleet Air Arm and a chance to fly. According to our shipmates, we were dreaming.

Clem beat me into the cutter by two seconds and was immediately back aft leaning over the engine. He'd brought an ordinary seaman with him, chosen to handle the forward lines and lookout. The bloke was a weather-beaten type who looked too old for his rating; I had no idea who he was.

Though I'd been in the navy for just a year and nine months, and only the last 10 months of that at sea, I was a midshipman. That made me an officer, though not a real one if you asked most in the navy. Real or not, I was in command.

'What's your name?' I yelled into the wind toward the unknown bloke.

'Smith, sir.'

'First name?'

'Jerry, sir.'

'Okay, Jerry, I'm Jake Hunt. Sing out loud if you spot anything. It's hard to hear over this wind and sea.'

'Yes, sir,' Jerry yelled, and waved from his station at the bow.

They had the davits out, wide of the ship's side now, and the boat's roll changed to a short, uncomfortable swing port and starboard, and a bunt fore and aft. Getting the cutter into the sea would be a circus trick, but there wasn't time to worry about it.

'All set lads?' I yelled.

'Ready for'ard, sir,' Smith yelled back.

Clem Turner grinned at me from the stern. 'No guts, no glory Jake,' he called. 'Ready here.'

Five degrees of port wheel and watch the sea. They'd lowered us to a height just above the line of crests, and I waited for the next big swell to

come powering through. It came soon enough, the trough disappearing as the sea raced up towards us, looking sure to swamp the boat.

From the bridge these seas were majestic scenery; up close, they were killer mountains of water created to bury small boats and ignorant midshipmen. It was awe-inspiring. Terrifying. My concentration was so intense, everything disappeared except me, the boat and the wave. Our lives depended on the next few seconds.

Don't take chances, the captain had said, apparently a man with a sense of humour. Inside I gave myself a kick, *get it right.* But I was so far out of my comfort zone I wanted my mum. Then I remembered explaining to her why I wanted to join the navy. *A life of adventure, that's what I want*.

Welcome to your first big adventure at sea, Jake.

Just before the crest peaked, I gave the signal to slip, and we fell a metre into the water, landing hard, like a sledgehammer slamming into rock.

The bow pitched down as 15 knots of the ship's speed washed off to five or six. Then our own propellers bit, the stern dug in, and we pick up speed. We dropped back against *Vampire* quickly and pulled away from the ship's side. Clem and Jerry, like me, were bulky with lifejackets and wet weather gear. We were all hanging on, wedging ourselves into the boat so we couldn't be thrown around, or out.

My plan was to come around in a big loop to port and angle in towards the *Vampire's* wake. To me, that first wave looked like the right one. We raced down to the trough, then started the 180-degree turn, cutting a white foaming arc into the face of the next swell. From the trough, looking up, the wave was a wall of water, windswept and frothing, and only a fool wouldn't have been afraid. The cutter tossed like a twig in boiling water.

I'd seen smooth water all right, but there had never been any guarantee that it would stay that way. As we heeled over to port, it seemed like we'd be hurled off the approaching crest. Our turn tightened, and I added full throttle, the wheel already hard to port, trying to get us around before we broached.

The cutter was reluctant to turn the last 90 degrees. If we remained beam on, or even if the wave took us on the starboard quarter, we'd be swamped. In a sea like this, judgement wasn't enough. We needed luck.

We came around, slowly at first, then whipped about as the chop slapped the stern into place. We surfed at speed back the way we'd come,

then hung off the back of the next swell. The cutter backed off to 10 knots, and I firewalled the throttle again to maintain steerage. Drenched and windswept, we rode that cutter like a train on a roller coaster, and it would have been exciting if it weren't so bloody terrifying.

The *Vampire* disappeared, and we were on our own as the big ships steamed away together, still at 15 knots, passing the fuel hose back before slipping the other lines. Only then would *Vampire* come back for us. We wouldn't see them for half an hour at best. I did my mental calculations. 12 minutes between the time the *jimmy* fell to when we launched, another three before we were actually following in the ship's wake. 15 minutes. In that time, we would have travelled four nautical miles, near enough. If we could make 12 knots in this sea, we'd be back at the spot where he fell within 20 minutes.

I didn't expect to find anything, but we had to try.

Clem was grinning like a crazy man. Maybe he liked excitement.

'How long before we get into the right area do you reckon?' I called. *Nothing like a second opinion*.

'Fifteen or 20 minutes,' he yelled back. He'd been doing the same sums. 'Nice launch,' he added.

'Any time the boat's not swamped, it's a good one.'

Clem just kept on grinning. I turned to Smith. 'All right, Jerry?'

He gave me a thumbs up. 'Enjoying the ride, sir,' he yelled.

Smith was a steady man under pressure, and no doubt that's why Clem had chosen him. *But enjoying the ride?*

I doubted that.

Once on track, I concentrated on the helm. *Vampire's* wake was gone, and the monstrous swell had us surfing at 30 knots one minute and hanging off the back of waves the next. It was impossible to hold a steady course, but I tried, and that kept me busy for the next 15 minutes. Then we slowed and started looking.

'Keep a good lookout,' I yelled, and tried to do the same myself.

We weren't going to see anything in the troughs, but on the crests, we might. At least the *jimmy* had been wearing a life vest.

I'd been on the bridge observing because I'd been told a replenishment at sea was a fine demonstration of seamanship.

Both the captain and I saw what happened.

'Man overboard,' he shouted. 'Stop the RAS and secure all lines.'

Word was passed to the guys on the forecastle, but they already knew.

'Launch the cutter, sir?' I'd asked, not really thinking, just scratching an itch to do something.

'Take Turner,' said the captain. Commander Ian Jackson was a lean, tanned, bearded man, crafty and wise in the ways of the sea. 'He's the best seaman. Let him pick one more. We'll be back for you in forty minutes. Take your time, be thorough and don't take chances.'

Don't take chances?

I'd been suggesting the cutter be launched, not necessarily that I take command. There were 18 other officers on board, all of them more experienced than me. Maybe the *old man* figured I could be spared if things didn't work out. *Never volunteer.* The old service adage came back to me.

Twenty-five minutes into our mission, Smith sighted *Vampire,* steaming back, at first a black smudge on the horizon but growing quickly.

Then Clem Turner shouted, 'Port quarter, sir, man in the water.'

I looked, saw nothing, and brought the boat around to the heading Clem indicated, slowing to five knots.

'There,' shouted Smith, and after a few seconds, I saw him, a flash of orange and a waving hand.

'That's a fucking miracle,' I said aloud. 'I'm putting him on the port side,' I shouted forward into the wind to Smith and then again aft to Clem, and as I brought the boat in close, they hooked our first lieutenant awkwardly out of the water like a big sack of dripping laundry.

'Welcome aboard, Sir,' I said.

Smart arse, I accused myself. But I didn't like the *jimmy* much; he rode the junior officers as if we could never give him what he wanted. There was no charity or softness in the man, and his humour, what there was of it, was black. He worked the sailors hard too. It was a tight ship as a result, but not a happy one.

Today we're good enough, you fucker. But I wasn't holding my breath waiting for thanks. After a minute, he jacked himself up onto one elbow to see who his rescuers were. The hard-eyed assessment hadn't changed, but the tone of voice was different. *Sincere. Grateful*.

‘Well done, you men,’ he said. Then he fell back and passed out.

Clem was looking at him with little compassion. ‘Well, I guess he’s back.’

‘I’m going to point the bow into the sea for a while until *Vampire* picks us up,’ I said. ‘With a bit of luck, there’ll be a beer ration tonight.’

Clem’s grin returned.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I could use a beer right now.’

Chapter 3

We got back on board without me crashing the cutter into the ship's side, and I've never been happier in my life to step onto a steel deck. They were ready for us, and the *jimmy* was carried off to sickbay, conscious but unable to stand.

The lookout from the bridge was waiting for us.

'Captain's compliments, and would you report to the bridge with the boat's crew, sir?'

'We're on the way.'

We moved toward the bridge in the uneven, opportunistic way made necessary by a vessel in heavy seas. But, compared to the cutter, the movement of *Vampire* seemed gentle. The captain was in his chair, and when we arrived, he stood to greet us. A rare courtesy.

I felt at ease after our adventure. Confident.

'Let's have your report, Midshipman Hunt,' the captain said.

'Heavy seas at the outset, Sir, but we had a bit of luck and got away all right. We had about four nautical miles to cover, so we tried to average 12 knots. Then after 15 minutes, we started our search. Turner spotted the first lieutenant, and then Smith saw him as well. We got the cutter alongside him. Both Turner and Smith pulled him on board, and that wasn't easy under the circumstances. It was a good performance by the men, sir.'

'Good performance all around,' said the captain. 'Anything further?'

I took my chance. 'It would have been faster and safer by helicopter, sir. We were dead lucky to spot the first lieutenant from a boat.'

The *old man* knew exactly what I was talking about.

'Ah yes,' he said. 'Your application to become aircrew. It would be a pity, Hunt. You have the makings of a seaman officer.'

'When I was aboard *Melbourne,* I had the opportunity to fly, sir. It's what I want to do.'

The *old man* was kind enough not to remind me that what I wanted was of marginal interest to the navy.

'We're a destroyer, not an aircraft carrier or frigate, so we were never going to have a helicopter available. In any case, a fellow your size fits better on the bridge of a ship than in a cockpit. When your posting to *Vampire* ends, there will be an opportunity for commentary from this ship on your future career. You'll have to be patient.'

I don't do patient, but ships' captains don't want to hear about the foibles of midshipmen.

'Aye, sir,' I said.

Commander Jackson was used to me harping on about becoming a pilot. I wasn't getting much traction.

I'd be getting Jackson's recommendation when I left the *Vampire,* and I knew the chances he'd support my application were slim. There was no recent precedent for such a transfer, and any seaman officer asked to recommend a move to aircrew instinctively opposed it. An officer making such an application had to be saved from himself.

But I just wanted to fly.

My first seagoing posting had been to the aircraft carrier *Melbourne.* I took with me one blue canvas bag, and reported to my training officer, Lieutenant Bevan Walsh. Walsh was a died-in-the-wool *fishhead,* which is to say, a seaman officer. A bridge watchkeeper who had spent his adult life at sea. He loved all things nautical and hated *birdies*. In other words, anyone who got airborne from the carrier. They, to Walsh's jaundiced view, defied nature and denied man's natural habitat. Which, of course, was the sea.

A month into our cruise, steaming north off the west coast of Borneo, Walsh and I came off watch and went to the officer's mess for a cold drink and a quiet debrief of the day. We sat in armchairs opposite two Fleet Air Arm Lieutenants who were drinking beer and telling flying stories.

'Seamen officers don't drink alcohol at sea,' Walsh said to me pointedly. 'Someone must be sober so *birdies* like Plover here can be saved when they crash.'

Plover was a handsome, blonde man, bearded and tall, with the wings of a naval aviator pinned to his white tropical shirt. He looked at Walsh with

amusement.

'Cheers, Bevo,' he raised his beer in salute. Then he looked at me. 'What your training officer says is true. He fished me out of the sea six months ago when I ditched a Wessex. That's why some men have to be *fishheads*. So *birdies* can be saved to drink grog at sea and bed beautiful women ashore.'

'Those who don't kill themselves before they go ashore to meet those beautiful women,' said Walsh.

'Our skill and daring protects us,' said Plover. 'Life is too short to be a *fishhead.*'

'Admit it, Roger,' said Walsh. 'Flying is a frivolous pursuit, and all *birdies* are insane.'

'Don't knock it if you haven't tried it,' said Plover.

That sounded like a challenge to me.

'All right then,' I said, keen to prove I was a real *fishhead.* 'Next trip you have space, sir, I'll fly with you. When we land, I'll tell you the same thing. It's a frivolous pursuit.'

'Done,' said Plover with a lazy smile. 'And you are Midshipman...?'

'Hunt, sir. Jake Hunt.'

'Righto Hunt. Be on the flight deck at 07:45 tomorrow morning. We'll go flying.' He finished his beer with a flourish and left.

'Bloody *birdies,*' Walsh said. 'They're all fucking mad.'

That was undoubtably true, but after one sortie I was ready to join the asylum. It was as if I'd been sleeping my whole life and was suddenly awake.

When the letter containing a copy of Jackson's report of my performance on the *Vampire* arrived, it was different from those of previous ships.

Hunt has shown himself to be a competent officer during his posting in HMAS Vampire. He is a highly motivated individual and has requested a transfer to train as a Fleet Air Arm pilot. Should an opening occur in that specialisation, it is recommended that he be offered the opportunity to retrain.

Commander Ian Jackson. What a man. In navy speak he'd gone about as far as he could to support my dream. Having that one recommendation on the books could make all the difference.

The second review was below the first, this one from the first lieutenant. There wasn't much to expect here; the *jimmy* would bury my ambitions without a thought. The man didn't like me, and I returned the sentiment.

During his time in HMAS Vampire, Midshipman Hunt has been a competent and conscientious Officer of the Watch. In his other duties, he has conducted himself in the finest traditions of the service, particularly so during the rescue of a man overboard in heavy seas while Vampire transited the Coral Sea.

Hunt has applied for aircrew training, and the navy would benefit by having such a highly motivated and capable officer in this role. His application is supported without reservation.

Maybe fishing the *jimmy* out of the water was a good day's work after all.

Chapter 4

TONY GUSELLI

It was exactly 18:30 when Guselli turned the jeep's lights off and coasted quietly to a stop outside headquarters. Usually he spoke with the colonel, *Rooster*. Not tonight. Tonight, he was meeting the general. That didn't happen often, and he was nervous. Midway along the back of the structure was the window to the general's office. It stayed closed while Guselli paused for 10 minutes, letting the night sounds settle, and the shadows absorb the stationary jeep. As he waited, Guselli looked around carefully, listening for footsteps, watching for movement. *Nothing*. He tapped on the glass, and the window opened.

'Make it quick,' said an annoyed voice.

'Yes, sir,' Guselli said. 'We questioned Corban from the 135th.'

'Go on.'

'Very successful, sir.' Guselli summarised Corban's information.

'And Corban?'

'Dead, sir. We dropped him near Blackhorse. If they find him, they'll figure it was *Charlie* killed him.'

'Will they?'

As usual. Fuckin' questions.

'We cut him up like he'd been tortured,' Guselli said.

'After he was dead?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Was there blood?'

'Some, sir, but he bled a lot when he was shot.'

‘Surprise, surprise.’ The general’s voice was dry and mocking. There was silence between them while the general thought.

‘Go back,’ said the general. ‘Take one of Corban’s Blackhorse dealers alive. Transport him to Corban’s body, cut both their heads off and make sure Corban is soaked with blood. Hold the new guy up by his ankles if you must; drain him out. No sane man is going to question who owns the blood. Do it tonight. Spread the word that Corban and his man were competing with Vietnamese drug dealers. This was gang revenge, Corban getting what was coming to him. Report to me tomorrow, same time.’

The fuckin’ general was as mad as a cut snake, and just as dangerous. But Guselli had a rule, and it was simple: *Never say no to the general*.

‘Yes, sir.’

The window closed. Guselli drove away. *Christ almighty. There would be no sleep tonight*.

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