

JUST ONCE

DELETED SCENE #3



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Fall of Saigon-April 29, 1975

White Christmas played on the radio, the signal they'd all been waiting for.

Since the North Vietnamese had attacked the highlands north of Saigon two months ago and the South Vietnamese army had retreated, then continued to retreat in front of the NVA advance, the end had been nigh.

Charley probably should have left then, but the allure of what he saw through the lens of his camera was too much. So he stayed, and then he stayed some more.

He was no longer associated with the army, though he knew many of the soldiers who remained. After the military withdrawal in 1973, Marines had been left behind to guard the embassy and Tan Son Nhut Airbase. Yesterday the airbase had come under attack.

Though he was in Saigon on his own, Charley had been living with the *Time* staffers at the Continental Palace Hotel. He often sold photographs to *Time*, as well as *Newsweek*, *Associated Press* and whoever else would buy them.

"Gotta go." He shook the shoulder of one of the correspon-

dents. They'd all been dozing, having been awake since the airbase went *kaboom* the day before. "Grab your stuff."

They'd packed the instant President Ford had launched Operation Frequent Wind, which would evacuate all remaining Americans in Saigon, along with many of their employees, as well as their families.

The original plan had been to use transport planes, but once the airbase was sacked, a helicopter lift took its place. From what Charley had heard, it would be the largest helicopter evacuation ever attempted. Over a thousand Americans and five thousand South Vietnamese were to be removed from Saigon.

The eight or so journalists at the Continental Palace waited until the armed militia—what Charley had often heard called *Ruff Puffs*—arrived to escort them to a prearranged rendezvous point deeper in the city, where several other journalists and a few missionaries joined them.

Gunfire exploded nearby and they all ducked. How long would it take him to stop ducking whenever there was a sudden loud noise?

The entire city smelled like spent gunpowder and sewage. Dust hovered in the air, stuck to their sweating faces, got in their eyes and their noses and their mouths.

"Now what?" Charley asked a militiaman.

The guy shrugged.

One of the missionaries, a tall, thin, pale young man with oddly dark eyes considering his hair, tried Vietnamese.

The guy shrugged again.

The small crowd murmured and shifted, uneasily.

"Maybe we should just keep heading for the airbase." A correspondent whose affiliation Charley could not place stared longingly in that direction.

At least the airbase was no longer on fire.

As if to make his thoughts a lie, something went boom and a plume of smoke rose from Tan Son Nhut.

Nevertheless, the correspondent tried to leave; the militiamen burst into rapid Vietnamese and ushered him back.

“They say the Marines are coming,” the missionary translated.

“Sure they are,” the correspondent said.

They continued to wait; what could they do? Gunfire popped all around them; it was hard to tell where it was coming from. At least the militia was armed. Charley didn’t think anyone else was.

Not for the first time, he was grateful for the .45 in his camera bag. He’d never taken it out, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t.

A helicopter swooped low. A rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire followed. The aircraft waggled back and forth and several people gasped.

“It’s going down!” someone cried, but the helicopter straightened then flew on in the direction of the U.S. Embassy.

Charley felt an irresistible urge to follow it. He picked up his camera bag, hoisted it over his shoulder, considered his duffel and left it behind. It was full of the same clothes he had on—blue jeans and formerly white T-shirts died mud brown. White was too much of a target, as was the olive drab the soldier’s wore. Brown didn’t show much dirt. Brown didn’t even show much blood.

Charley never did see that duffel again.

One of the militiamen stepped in his way, jabbered something and showed Charley his rifle.

“Very nice.” Charley withdrew his pistol. “Like mine?”

The guard, who had to be all of seventeen—though it was hard to determine age here, a twenty-five-year-old appeared fifteen, while a forty-year-old appeared seventy—rolled his eyes and released another spate of Vietnamese.

“He says ‘it’s your funeral,’” the missionary translated.

“I’ll be back,” Charley said, though he thought it was probably as much of a lie as that translation. He’d recognized a few Vietnamese curse words that had nothing to do with *funeral*.

“Blackwell, are you nuts?” shouted one of the *Time* photographers.

Charley never could keep the two of them straight.

He didn't answer what he figured was rhetorical. Instead, he hoofed it in the direction of the embassy.

He hadn't been in the jungle for a few years, but everything he'd learned about stealth came back as quickly as it did in the night when he dreamed.

Walk softly, listen for every breath of sound all around you. If you think you heard a swish of grass, you did. Better safe than sorry. Never move forward until you know what's around that corner, or over that hill, or under your feet. Trust your instincts. If something feels off, it's off.

In that way, he made it through the jungle of Saigon alive.

He reached the corner that would spill him onto Thon Nhut Boulevard. The embassy was only a block away.

As he hesitated, the helicopter he'd followed, or maybe another one, lifted from a rooftop more slowly than he'd ever seen one lift and lumbered away.

Charley risked a quick glance down the street, which was empty all the way up to the embassy. There the narrow expanse was packed with people who seemed to be pushing at the gate.

He lifted his camera, took a few shots, ducking back behind the building when anyone glanced his way.

This was the story. Right here. Right now. He had to get inside the embassy.

Charley's heart beat so fast, he took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm it. It wouldn't do for him to think he heard footsteps approaching when, in fact, it was only the thud of his own heart.

He ran down an alley. The acrid breeze stirred his hair, which he'd only cut a few times since 1973. He'd always wondered if his curls would grow up, into an Afro, or tumble down like Rapunzel. Thankfully he'd gotten Afro. Rapunzel would have been embarrassing.

He peered around the corner—people at the rear of the embassy, but not as many as there were out front, and no one that he could see between himself and the building, so he sprinted down the street. His feet barely seemed to touch the ground, though puffs of dust rose all around him. Strange how alive he felt whenever he faced death. It probably wasn't healthy, but what was around here?

There were so many Vietnamese milling about on the outside of the fifteen-foot concrete fence that he couldn't even see the back door of the embassy through the gate.

A few of the Vietnamese turned. He lifted his camera and fired off several frames. Their expressions were a combination of despair and hope, with a little desperation mixed in.

Maybe he should go back to where he'd left the others. Then he saw a familiar face.

"Hosey!"

The young Marine—weren't they all young? When had he started to feel old?—glanced over at the sound of his nickname, short for Hoseranski. Confusion passed over his face. "What are you doing here? A group of Marines just escorted the last journalists to the airbase. They should be on the USS Mobile any second."

Lucky bastards.

"I got separated." If he told the kid he'd purposely left the group, he might not get inside. "Can you—?"

Hosey shook his head.

Maybe he wasn't going to get inside anyway. To be truthful, Charley had no idea how he'd manage it without letting in three hundred refugees. It would be pandemonium. Someone might get killed. That someone could be him. His skin prickled again, not fear but . . . something else. Maybe excitement at the realization that he still had to try?

"Run along." Hosey motioned with his rifle. But he also flicked his eyes sideways.

Charley followed that flick and remembered. There was a side gate.

He wasn't the only one who knew about it, but there were a lot less people there than there'd been at the back. Unfortunately, he didn't know the Marine on guard.

"Buddy!" He waved for the man's attention.

Several of the Vietnamese followed suit, even mimicking his "Buddy!"

The Marine's eyes didn't flicker. If Charley got out of this alive, he'd recommend the guy for duty at the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*.

Charley didn't realize he'd lifted his camera until the motor drive whirred.

That got the young man's attention. "You Blackwell?"

Charley lowered the camera, nodded.

"Hosey sent word. On the count of three you run for this gate. Anyone grabs at you, you shake 'em off. I'm not to let anyone in here but you. Got it?"

In other words, if any of the South Vietnamese were clinging to Charley, he was going to eat gate, because the Marine wouldn't be opening it.

He nodded, slipping his camera into his bag with the gun and zipping it shut.

"One, two, three," the guard said more quickly than Charley's physics teacher's ever had.

Caught flat-footed, he lurched forward. The soldier stared straight ahead. Was he going to let Charley eat gate anyway?

At the last instant, the kid moved fast, unlocking the gate, opening it just enough for Charley to skid through then clanging it shut again. Before he could get it locked, two-dozen Vietnamese slammed into it.

"Help!" the guard said, almost conversationally.

Charley leaned all his weight on the gate. Hands pulled at his

clothes, his bag, his hair. Voices lifted in alarm, surrounding him with so much sound his ears rang.

The gate slid farther open. Several Vietnamese squeezed through and took off toward the thousands gathered around the swimming pool awaiting evacuation. This success only seemed to make those on the outside more determined, and a few more slipped in. If this kept up, they might all get through. If those at the back gate and the front saw them the embassy would be overrun.

“Help!” the guard shouted louder, though he still sounded pretty calm.

A few of the people who had been milling around on the grounds hurried over to lend their weight.

An elderly gentleman got caught in the opening. One of the helpers tapped him on the head with a rifle. The old man crumpled.

The gate shut; the lock engaged. The guard stepped away. Everyone else did too.

On the other side, a small riot ensued. People in the rear, not realizing the entrance had been shut, shoving forward, no doubt trying to help, but instead only hurting. Those in the front slammed into the bars, as well as the concrete wall. In seconds, more refugees were bleeding than the old man.

“You’re going to need to back off!” The guy on Charley’s left held a grenade launcher.

The one on his right carried a machine gun that appeared as old as he was—maybe from the second world war.

Several others carried hunting knives in their belts.

Charley was pretty sure a few of those milling about in the open area were CIA, though he didn’t know which. He’d put his bet on the ones with the hunting knives. Spooks were called spooks for a reason.

“Why aren’t you on the USS Mobile with the rest of the press?” asked Mr. Grenade Launcher.

“He got separated,” the guard said.

Grenade Launcher lifted an eyebrow. He wasn't buying it, but what could he do? Throw Charley back outside? That would involve opening the gate and no one seemed inclined. As the crowd beyond it continued to increase along with the volume of their unrest and no one wanted that mini-riot to escalate into a full-scale battle, Charley figured he was here for the duration.

Their helpers wandered off; Charley joined the guard. “How long until everyone's out?”

“The way things are going? Days.”

The faces beyond this gate were different from those at the back gate, but their expressions were the same. Despair. Desperation. Hope.

Charley retrieved his camera.

Someone spit at him. The spittle landed on his shoe. He took a picture of that too.

The helicopters continued to arrive, load and fly away. There still appeared to be several thousand Vietnamese waiting by the pool, the proverbial bread and fishes, never seeming to decrease no matter how many were distributed to the aircraft carriers waiting off the coast.

The crowd outside continued to grow. Someone had a radio. Joni Mitchell squalled *Yellow Taxi*. Not one of his favorites.

As darkness fell, two helicopters landed and dozens of Marines leaped out.

“That can't be good,” Charley said.

“We aren't going to finish the evacuation tonight.” Hosey, who had been relieved from guard duty at the back gate by some South Vietnamese soldiers, cast a pointed glance at those inside. “Obviously.”

One of the squads of Marines hustled to the side entrance and fixed their bayonets.

“What the fuck?” Charley asked.

“It isn't going to be pretty,” Hosey murmured.

Charley sighed, but he took the picture. The photo of the Marines with their bayonets protruding from the ends of their rifles, the hundreds of frantic faces beyond, was one of Charley's best that day.

By morning the squad at the rear used their rifle butts to knock back anyone trying to scale the fence. The bayonet squad kept the Vietnamese from bothering, or so they were told. Charley saw a few people on the street near the side gate bleeding from wounds that appeared suspiciously slicey.

While he got some great shots, Charley also missed a few. Who could have predicted that someone on a motorbike would throw a grenade at the front of the embassy? Maybe the CIA, but they were too busy blowing up their own communications equipment a few buildings away to let anyone know.

Charley did get photographs of those wounded by that grenade, but there was nothing he or anyone inside could do to help them beyond passing first aid items through the gate. Opening the gate would only cause a stampede that left more injured.

Charley had never felt so inadequate or helpless in his life. All he had to offer were the photos he took to record everything, no matter how horrible, damning or inhumane. Now he just had to get out of there, with the film, alive.

He wandered through the embassy, snapping shots of the deserted offices, stray bits of paper on the floor, empty desks. Everything of value had been loaded onto a freighter days ago.

"You're going to have to get on one of the next few helicopters." Hosey stood in the hall. "We were told a while ago that there'd only be nineteen more sent. Word just came from the White House that we load only Americans from now on."

"What about . . . ?" Charley's gaze drifted to the window, through which he caught a glimpse of those Vietnamese still waiting.

Hosey shrugged. "Orders, man. I think Kissinger and Ford are

getting pissed. Ambassador Martin was supposed to be on a helo an hour ago. He was still pushing Vietnamese onto the transports.”

The helicopters had been landing inside the embassy walls near the swimming pool where only a few days ago a giant tamarind tree had stood. The Ambassador had resisted ordering the tree cut down until very last minute, believing it signaled defeat. Rumor had it that embassy staff had been sneaking outside for a week and chopping off parts of the tree that the Ambassador couldn't see from his office. In the end, the tree had come down.

Hosey pointed a grubby finger at Charley's chest. "You get over to the swimming pool and get your ass on the next bird."

Charley nodded, but as the CH-46 Sea Knight, coded Lady Ace 09, lifted into the air with Code Two aka Ambassador Martin, Charley hid in a closet. About a dozen Marines were still there. He'd be leaving when they did.

Thus commenced the longest two hours of his life.

When the *whoop-whoop* of the Sea Knight had faded away, Charley crept out, feeling like a paparazzi. Skulking at the windows and in the doorways taking pictures did nothing to alleviate that uncomfortable feeling. Luckily, the Marines in the courtyard were so focused outward they never saw or heard him.

The Vietnamese didn't realize at first that the airlift had ended. When they did, they began to climb the concrete wall.

The Marines smacked the hands of the first dozen or so with their rifle butts. After that, it was chaos. There were too many Vietnamese and too few Marines. Despite the soldier's efforts, they poured over the top of the wall like the ants used to pour from an anthill when Charley's mother doused them with dish soap.

The Marines formed a line, shoulder to shoulder, their hands clenching on their rifles.

For an instant Charley thought there'd be another My Lai. His finger tightened on his camera. The motor drive whirred.

The sergeant saw Charley, scowled. His mouth formed the distinctive outline of "Fuck me," then he shouted, "Fall back!"

Everyone did, including Charley.

Right before he reached the embassy, Charley looked over his shoulder. Dozens of people ran after them, faces crazed, hands outstretched. They were all going to be torn apart.

The sergeant slammed the door and locked it.

Bodies thudded into the other side, fists pounded. The door seemed to bow.

"We need evac." The radio operator did his thing. "Embassy is compromised. Over."

The radio crackled. The kid cursed.

"ETA?" the sergeant asked.

"An hour."

The door bowed again.

Charley's skin tingled. His blood seemed to course faster. That "I'm so alive" feeling made him dizzy.

"Everybody on the roof," the sergeant ordered, then grabbed the back of Hosey's shirt. "*You* keep an eye on *that!*" He poked Charley in the chest with his rifle.

"Yes, Gunny!" Hosey responded.

"You." He poked Charley again. "Don't be an asshole."

"Too late, Gunny!" Charley said.

"Do *not* try to butter me up," the sergeant snapped. "Go!"

Charley hurried up the steps, Hosey on his heels, the sergeant bringing up the rear. Behind them, the door started to rattle.

On the roof, the Marines stood around uncertain, their M-16s clasped in their dirty, sweaty hands. In the fading light, they appeared younger than ever before.

What else could Charley do but record those faces, lined with exhaustion and remnants of smoke? The city behind them also appeared exhausted, with remnants of smoke.

The sergeant stood framed by the open doorway, in his hand—

“Is that a grenade?” Charley asked.

“Tear-gas.” Hosey remained glued to Charley’s side. Sometimes Charley’s elbow bumped him when he lifted the camera.

The door below gave way with a crash. From the sounds coming up the stairwell, another riot ensued.

The sergeant tossed the tear-gas through the door and slammed it shut on the screams.

“ETA?” he shouted.

“On the way,” the radio operator answered.

A wisp of the tear gas crept under the door. The sergeant backed away, bumping into Charley or maybe Charley bumped into him. He had his camera to his face, photographing that wisp of smoke.

“Hosey, get this civilian behind the line! Make sure he doesn’t get himself kilt.”

“I’d like to make sure none of us get kilt, sir.” Hosey grabbed Charley’s arm and towed him toward the others.

“Oo-rah,” the sergeant said, and the others echoed, “Oo-rah!”

“Orders, Gunny?”

The sergeant, gaze on the doorway, didn’t answer.

“Do we shoot?”

Shit. Charley did *not* want to take pictures of Marines firing on unarmed civilians, but he’d have to. Then he’d be lucky if they didn’t toss him from the roof of the embassy into the ever-growing crowd below.

“Gunny!” The radio operator pointed to the sky just as the familiar *whoop-whoop* reached them.

The sergeant let out a relieved breath. “Red smoke!”

An instant later red smoke trailed upward to mark their position. Not long after, another Sea Knight touched down.

Everyone piled in, Hosey shoving Charley ahead of him, even as Charley tried to photograph the roof one last time.

A Marine sprinted for the flagpole, lowering the flag so fast his hands blurred.

Charley's camera whirred.

The soldier stuffed the flag into a paper bag as he climbed aboard.

Vietnamese poured from the stairwell as the Sea Knight lifted from the roof. They raced across the concrete. A few tried to jump up and catch the landing skids.

Charley leaned out, camera still clicking.

Gunfire sounded. The helicopter dipped and swayed.

Charley let go of his camera, threw his arms out to catch himself on something, anything, anyone. But there was nothing.

The camera slammed into Charley's chest; if he'd had any breath left it would have been knocked from his lungs. He didn't have time to be glad he'd looped the strap around his neck. He was too busy falling.

