

JUST ONCE

DELETED SCENE #1



LORI HANDELAND

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Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam-Fall, 1972

“How can there be any fucking jungle left with all the shit we’ve dropped on it?” The Waz hacked through a wall of bamboo with a machete he’d taken off a dead VC.

Charley was next in line, but he stayed back ten yards. When the Waz was in a mood, he swung that machete kind of wild.

“The reason there is a jungle is because the heat and the rain are perfect for growing a jungle.”

They’d been following a VC patrol for days. But the bastards had stayed just out of reach. They’d almost given up and retreated, then the Waz, on point, had seen one of them scouting their back trail. He’d shot the guy, confiscated his machete and they’d continued on.

Tens of thousands of gallons of napalm and Agent Orange might have been dropped on Quang Ngai, but from the thickness of the foliage in front of them, those planes had missed this quadrant completely.

Then there were the tunnels. Zillions of them. When they found one, men got squirrely. With good reason.

VC could pour out of them and overrun you. Or they could

stay in them and decimate you. Or they might not be in there at all. However the occupied/unoccupied state of the place had to be determined.

Charley thanked his lucky stars he was too tall to be a tunnel rat, the unfortunate tag given to those of smaller stature whose job it was to crawl into those holes and find out what was what. Sometimes the soldier met a rifle, or a bayonet, or a grenade. Sometimes he made it out alive. The reward for that was he got to do it all over again.

Being tall meant Charley avoided tunnel surfing. It also meant his head towered over many of the other soldiers, making him an excellent target. But he'd rather be a target out in the open, than a sitting duck in a tunnel.

"You're so smart, Polaroid, you wanna hack a while?"

The question must have been rhetorical since the Waz continued to slash even more wildly at the overgrowth.

Charley was on his second tour, happy to be serving with many of the men he'd served with during the first—the Waz, Jim and Lieutenant Abnale being three of them. He wasn't happy they'd been sent to Quang Ngai, which had been the site of a lot of heavy fighting even before the My Lai Massacre.

Charley had still been in high school when the news of My Lai had come out, over a year and a half after it had happened. Ronald Haeberle, the photographer who'd taken photographs of the killings, as well as the bodies in the aftermath, had kept some film from his personal camera. When his army issue photographs seemed to have dropped into the great black hole of the U.S. military, he'd released the shots he'd held back—and nearly been court martialed for it.

The outcry over My Lai had been tremendous, as it should have been. But moving forward, soldiers in Quang Ngai province had to deal with an understandably twitchy civilian population, an increase in VC and superiors who kept their platoons on a very short leash.

In the jungle, fighting an entrenched enemy on their own ground, that wasn't always a good thing. VC insurgency had multiplied. Firefights were rampant. They approached villages with trepidation. The lieutenant believed U.S. soldiers were getting killed more often because they hesitated when they should have been shooting.

The whole war was cluster fuck, but it always had been.

In Quang Ngai, a lot of the locals gravitated to Charley because of the camera around his neck. They smiled, bowed, patted his arm, offered him bowls of rice and live chickens. In Quang Ngai, the photographer had been a hero, and they weren't going to forget it.

The lieutenant constantly reminded him, "If they're VC they'll still kill you no matter how many Polaroids you've given them."

Charley remembered Hau and kept his eyes open and his rifle nearby. The villagers weren't the only ones in Quang Ngai who were twitchy.

The Waz froze, his arm going up in the signal for "Silence."

Everyone held their breath, sank into a crouch, lifted their weapons and listened. Was that high pitched and rapid fire Vietnamese, or just the bugs talking?

Lieutenant Abnale crawled up to join The Waz. They spoke low. Abnale inched forward, parting the dense foliage for a peek.

At the crack of a rifle they all flinched and ducked.

At the sight of the lieutenant falling backward with a hole in his forehead, they all dived for cover. Bullets whizzed through the trees above them, murdering leaves, spraying bark. Though they couldn't see the enemy, the soldiers returned fire.

"Same shit, different day," Jim muttered.

"Haven't lost a lieutenant before," Charley said.

"I did." Jim paused to re-load. "First one I had." He frowned, fired off a shot. "Maybe it was the second."

He didn't appear any more concerned about losing Abnale now than he was about losing "whoever" back then.

Charley would have been worried about Jim's lack of emotion, if he wasn't feeling the same himself. Panic wasn't going to help anyone.

Several of the cherries—another name for FNGs—had dived behind trees, their eyes wide, their rifles lowered.

“Start shooting!” Charley shouted.

Even if they didn't hit anything, and from the way their hands were shaking, they weren't going to, the more shots in that direction the better. From the number of bullets winging their way, the enemy had more guns.

“Montcrief, call in an airstrike,” Sergeant Tillis ordered.

Montcrief was their radio operator. He'd been here almost as long as the Waz. He was headed home soon. Lucky bastard.

Montcrief didn't answer with his usual, cheery “Aye-aye! Coordinates?”

“Where the Sam Hell is he?”

With the lieutenant dead, Tillis was now in charge. He was an army lifer and proud of it. This was his second war. The first being Korea and he was adamant that they weren't going to fight to a “goddamn pussy tie” here as they had there.

One of the cherries gulped and pointed where the radio could just be seen sticking out of the underbrush, along with a set of boots, attached to legs that no longer moved.

The sergeant crawled to the radio and barked coordinates into it himself.

“Does he know what he's doing?” Jim asked.

“No idea.”

A screaming VC shot through the foliage, bayonet fixed. The Waz whacked him in the neck with the machete. He hit the ground spraying blood.

“Did you get that?” Jim pointed to Charley's camera, which he hadn't realized he'd lifted and pointed. He probably should have lifted and pointed his gun. One of these days, as both the sarge

and the lieutenant had told him, he was going to be sorry about that.

“No idea,” he repeated. He couldn’t remember what he’d done since the lieutenant had died.

“We need to fall back.” Sarge motioned for them to do so with one of his big, hard hands.

Those hands reminded Charley of his dad’s—scarred and rough. Right now he actually missed the man.

“Stay down,” the sergeant continued. “Follow me.”

“We’re getting help?” the Waz asked.

“Yep.” Sarge shoved his helmet back on his salt and pepper crew cut. “Planes were in the area with napalm.”

“They’re gonna drop napalm?” A cherry whose name Charley did not know—did he know any of them?—asked.

“Get used to it.” Sarge duck-walked to the rear.

Charley took some shots of the fallen radio operator’s boots, all alone now since Sarge had taken the radio. He hoped he’d taken a shot of the boots and the radio together. That would be a more powerful image.

“Quit fucking around, Polaroid.” Jim shoved him from behind. “I hear a plane.”

Charley lifted his gaze from the viewfinder. He heard it too. It sounded close. Too close. Like “gonna drop napalm on them” close.

He caught the flare of the sun off a wing directly above, then a trail of tiny black dots drifting down.

“Take cover!” he shouted.

The others turned, staring at him as if he were insane. Maybe he was. But he’d rather be insane than burned to death.

He ran, passing men up, hustling them along.

He reached the sergeant. “Get back on the radio. Tell them we’re here.”

“What do you think I told them?” Sarge demanded, but he

fiddled with the radio. He did *not* seem to know what he was doing.

Jim grabbed Charley's arm and hauled him along. Behind them, the first bomb hit with a *whoosh*. Flames flew upward spread outward.

The VC began to scream.

Charley thought he might hear those screams for the rest of his life.

"It's too close!" Sarge shouted. "Back off! Pull up!"

Charley glanced over his shoulder as the radio crackled. Someone spoke, though what they said was lost in a second, closer, *whoosh*.

"What do you mean it's too la—?"

The flames spread outward and over both Sarge and the radio. Those screams were closer, louder, worse.

Charley would definitely hear *those* screams for the rest of his life.

"Dammit, Charley, stop taking pictures and come on!"

Charley was still running, but he was also firing his camera back the way he'd been. He heard the plane again. He dropped his camera around his neck and shouted—

"Incoming!"

Something landed on Charley's stomach, driving the air from his lungs. He tensed, reaching for his knife.

It wasn't there. He'd have to use his fists.

Charley came up on one elbow, arm pulled back, fist made.

"Incoming, Daddy!" Lisa giggled just like her mother and threw her arms around his neck.

What had he been thinking to teach her to shout *incoming* whenever she jumped on him?

He'd been thinking it was cute, like she was. However it wouldn't have been so cute if he'd punched his little girl in the face.

He back on the mattress.

Lisa laid her head on this chest. “You sweaty.”

And he stunk. How long had he been dreaming of napalm?

About a decade.

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Kitchen.”

“She know you’re here?”

Lisa—the smartest, cutest four-year-old on the planet—squirmed closer and kissed his cheek. Her eyes—the same bright green as Frankie’s—twinkled.

“Lisa!” Frankie called from downstairs. “You better not have woken your father.”

“Too late!”

“Sorry,” Frankie said.

“We’re okay.” Or at least one of them was.

Charley’s hands shook. His chest kind of hurt. So did his throat. If he didn’t know better, he’d think he’d been screaming for hours. Except, if he had, Frankie would have been the one to wake him.

His daughter tumbled off his chest, bounced on the mattress once and then popped back up like a prairie dog. “What did you bring me?”

“Who said I brought you anything?”

Instead of pouting or crying, Lisa laughed.

From the moment he’d taken the photograph of her on Frankie’s stomach, Charley had been enthralled. A little person, both like him and like Frankie, and also like herself. He couldn’t get enough of the sight of her face.

He leaned over the bed and retrieved the shopping bag, as well as his camera.

He took shots as she accepted the bag, peeked inside. Her mouth made an *O*. Her eyes widened. She pulled out the stuffed black cat, hugged it until he feared the stuffing might burst, then threw herself into his arms. He barely had time to lower the camera before she ate the lens.

“Incoming!” she shouted, and kissed him on the lips.

Why had he thought they shouldn’t have children?

Oh yeah. Horrible world.

Strange, but as soon as Lisa entered it, things had looked a lot less horrible.

Like his nightmare. Sure his T-shirt was still damp; he could still smell the nervous sweat that always made him think of Vietnam. But the fear, the pain, the horror . . . fading fast. He just couldn’t hold onto that stuff when she was in his arms. If he could bottle that feeling there’d be no more need for Xanax.

“Where were you?” Lisa stared into the face of her toy, running her finger across the shiny plastic eyes the same shade as her own.

“The Indianapolis 500.”

“What that?”

“A car race.”

She wrinkled her nose. He had to agree.

He’d left Geographic and taken a job at the *Milwaukee Journal* so he could spend more time with his family. He hated it almost as much as he loved them. The assignments might bore him to death.

Last week he’d gotten the plumb task of photographing the “Dog of the Week” at the humane society. The little shit had bitten him.

The week before that he’d worked the three to midnight shift and been sent to photograph a fire. You’d think that would be exciting, but after seeing napalm . . . meh.

The week before that had been very slow on news. He’d been told to take his camera and drive around searching for features. His boss hadn’t been thrilled with the five rolls of film he’d shot on road kill.

“It seems to be a serious problem,” Charley said.

“You’re a serious problem.”

“But if you publish these, something might get done.”

“Yeah, we’ll all be fired.”

“But—”

“I’m not publishing these.” Elmer tossed them onto his desk. “In the future, when I say ‘go shoot some features’ find kids dancing in the water spraying from a fire hydrant. That kind of crap.”

“Crap is right.”

“What is wrong with you, Blackwell? I’d think you’d be thrilled to see something pleasant through that viewfinder after spending so much time in Third World shit holes and places that blow up every Sunday just for the hell of it.”

Charley would have thought so too, but he wasn’t. Happy-sappy photographs made his teeth ache and gave him a constant urge to find someplace or someone on the edge of blowing up next Sunday. His nightmares were worse and a couple times he could have sworn he heard helicopters *whoop-whooping* from a bright, blue clear sky when he was awake.

But he kept all that to himself. He wasn’t crazy—or at least not totally crazy. Not yet.

Charley wasn’t sure if Elmer had sent him to Indy to get rid of him for a while or because he knew Charley needed a little something more. But not even Mario Andretti clocking the fastest Indy lap ever at over 221 mph was enough.

Still, he had to keep trying. He’d promised to try.

Last week they’d bought a cabin in Fish Creek, a village on the Door County peninsula. They’d probably be paying it off longer than they were paying off this house, but Frankie had really wanted a place where the three of them could get away from it all.

The last time Charley had tried to get away from it all he’d wound up in Nepal just in time for an earthquake.

Ah, the good old days.

“Hi.” Frankie stood in the doorway.

Her smile was everything he’d ever wanted, at least until

they'd had Lisa and he realized there was more to want and he had it.

"You okay?"

He could never hide anything from her.

"Dream."

"Which one?"

"Napalm."

He had several on a hit parade that rotated through his brain in the night. Until he'd taken this job, he hadn't been home much, but they'd been together long enough for Frankie to have heard a toned-down description of each and every one. When he woke up screaming, crying, shaking, his resolve not to burden her with his past weakened. He babbled like a baby.

Once he hadn't wanted Frankie to see him that way, but she had and she'd helped. Now he never wanted anyone *but* her to see him that way. He was afraid Lisa had.

Frankie must have had the same thought, because her gaze flicked to their daughter. "Get dressed, honey. Today's the Circus Parade, remember?"

"Yay!" Lisa leaped off the bed and thundered out of the room.

"I am constantly amazed at how loud someone so small can be," Frankie said.

Charley didn't answer. He was thinking about the napalm and how hot it had been on his back. His hair had been singed at this nape, but nothing else not even his clothes. That should have made him feel . . .

Protected? Blessed? Magic?

He'd felt none of them. What he felt, every time he remembered it, was freaked out.

"You gonna be okay with Lisa?" Frankie asked.

Frankie was working the parade today; Charley was taking Lisa.

"Me?" Charley put his hand against his chest, got a palm full of sweaty T-shirt and fought not to grimace. "Of course."

He'd use an extra press credential, maybe get some shots for the paper, though he wasn't on the schedule. He and Frankie tried to work opposing hours so one of them could always be with their daughter, though sometimes that didn't work out. Then they either took her along on the assignment—the *Journal* was okay with their employees bringing family to certain events as long as the employee got the job done—or had the retired kindergarten teacher across the street watch her.

“You don't look so good.”

“I'm fine.” He stood. “Just need a shower and some coffee.” And some alone time so his hands would stop shaking.

“You want that coffee in the shower?”

“You'd do that for me?”

Those green eyes he loved so much met his. “I'd do anything for you.”

An hour later he pulled the mini van into the employee lot at the *Journal*. They could walk from here to the main parade route, as well as the parade staging area.

A lot of people trailed through the streets already. There were gonna be crowds. Massive crowds.

Charley felt the napalm on the back of his neck again. He hesitated getting out of the car, as did Frankie.

Charley blamed being at the U.S. Embassy in spring of 1975 for his discomfort with crowds. Vietnamese citizens crawling over the fence, rushing the guards, overrunning the place. The Marines doing their best not to let Saigon deteriorate into De Nang, where they'd had to fire on the citizens to get Americans out.

He did all right if he was taking photographs. Peering through the viewfinder of a camera made everything around him fade. All he saw was what he framed in the shot. But if he was surrounded by people, if there was shoving and shouting, he panicked.

“There shouldn't be shoving and shouting,” Frankie said.

He glanced at her, startled. Had he said that out loud? He didn't think so, but what did it matter?

She knew. She always knew.

"More like music and the laughter of children," Frankie continued. "Maybe a llama call or two."

"What's a llama sound like, Daddy?"

Charley started at the volume of her voice. Lisa was hyped already and she hadn't eaten any cotton candy yet.

"Shh, sweetie." Frankie set her hand on Lisa's dark curls. "Too loud for daddy."

"I'm okay." He was sweating and a little dizzy, but he didn't want his daughter's enthusiasm curbed because he couldn't suck it up and get over Saigon.

Charley climbed out of the car. He eyed the crowd on the street. Not so bad. At least they weren't screaming insults and throwing things. "Let's find some llamas and see what they sound like."

"Yay!" Lisa shouted and jumped out of the car.

She left Black Kitty, dressed in a tutu, behind and neither Frankie nor Charley pointed that out. Keeping track of Lisa was one thing. Keeping track of Lisa *and* Black Kitty. Not today.

Frankie handed Charley his camera, shouldering her own camera bag. He could tell by her expression that she'd noticed his unease. He supposed his eyes had been darting around like ping pong balls in a Bingo bowl.

Charley felt better with the camera in his hand, though he couldn't very well walk through the crowds watching the parade with the thing attached to his face. At least not when he was supposed to be having a nice day with his daughter.

God, he was a mess.

He picked up the next best thing to Xanax and perched her on his hip. She put an arm around his neck. Instantly, he felt less schizoid.

“Llamas, Daddy.” She pointed imperiously toward the lake, where the staging area was.

“I can take her if you want to . . .” Frankie’s voice drifted off.

What was he going to do, wait in the car? Go inside the building and not watch through the windows? He was pathetic, but not that pathetic.

Charley took his wife’s hand, set Lisa on the ground and took hers, too, then started forward. It was a lot easier than he’d thought it would be.

They walked several blocks. Sweat dripped down Charley’s face. But he kept going.

“Are you all right?”

“Could you stop asking me that?”

Frankie tilted her head, and the sun danced over her hair, turning it every shade of brown and red.

He was dazzled by her. Always.

“Probably not,” she said.

“I have dreams, Frankie. Everyone does.”

“Not the way you do.”

He shrugged. Almost everyone *he* knew did.

“Can I see lions, Daddy?”

“I think you can, right?” He glanced at his wife.

“What would a circus be without lions?”

Lisa’s forehead creased. “Does that mean there’ll be lions?”

They laughed and for a few minutes in the sunshine on that bright August day, all of Charley’s dreams were right here, right now, just this.

“Yes, sweetie. There’ll be lions.”

Lisa started skipping and singing—softly for a change. The three of them skirted the worst of the crowds by turning left or right for a block, slowly working their way east until Lake Michigan spread before them like a soft blue blanket.

The circus wagons stood in front of it, their colorful tableaux bright against a background of water and sky.

“Tiger!” Lisa shouted.

Charley’s breath caught. The last time anyone had shouted tiger, there’d actually *been* a tiger. While they weren’t common in Vietnam, they were *in* Vietnam. Several of them had become man-eaters. Try and fall asleep in the jungle after one of your buddies had been dragged off by a tiger. He was surprised he wasn’t dreaming of *that* night more often. Although maybe tonight . . .

“Crap,” Charley muttered. Why couldn’t he be normal? Sometimes he thought he almost was and then the next instant, he wasn’t.

“What’s wrong?” Frankie asked.

He shook his head. He didn’t want to discuss how many GIs had died by tiger. Ever.

They strolled the line of tableau wagons. Charley managed to avert his gaze from the one where a large and lifelike tiger snarled and swiped his larger than life claws seemingly right out of the painting in the direction of unwary observers.

The animals were being led into the cage wagons, which would carry them through the streets. The day was mild. Though many of them were from tropical climates, they hadn’t lived there since birth, if ever, and could become sick or even die by spending too much time directly beneath the sun if the day was scorching.

Had it only been last year when Tu-Tall, a five year old giraffe, had died before the parade even started? Milwaukeeans had wanted to stage an inquest to discover if the animal had truly died from a bad heart or if it had been left in the sun too long. The organizers of the parade intended to make sure such an occurrence never happened again. To that end, the amount of handlers had increased, as well as available large mammal veterinarians.

When a lion roared, Charley barely caught his daughter

before she took off in that direction. He lifted her onto his hip again.

“Lions. Tigers. Kitties!” Her shout was so joyous several of the passersby smiled in response.

“There are some lion cubs tied at the far end.” A grandmotherly, gray-haired lady pointed.

“Lions!” Lisa scrambled down his leg, then tugged on his arm. Charley laughed. “I guess we should head down there.”

Frankie appeared uncertain.

“I’m sure they’re pretty tame if they’re just tied out where everyone can see them.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“You’re not worried about your child and the lion cubs,” Charley repeated.

“Well, *now* I am.”

“Go to work. We’ll check out the lions, find ourselves a llama, probably get spit on, then watch the parade.”

Frankie glanced longingly up the hill at a place she’d already picked out as the best area to shoot the wagons as they tipped over the crest. “Okay. I’ll meet you here when it’s over?”

“We’ll meet you at the car.”

“But—”

Charley held up a hand. “I’ll be fine.”

Please, let me be fine.

Frankie left, looking over her shoulder several times.

Charley and Lisa cheerily waved.

They did exactly as he’d said. They found a llama ensconced in a cage wagon, long neck waving above it like a loose flagpole in a strong wind. The animal spit at them, narrowly missing Charlie’s shoe.

Lisa found that hilarious.

He bought her cotton candy and animal crackers.

“Your mom is gonna have a stroke when she sees your lips.” Charley kissed his daughter’s blue mouth.

Lisa giggled. "What's a stroke?"

"Something you don't need to worry about. Let's find those lion cubs."

"Yay!" The fist Lisa pumped was also blue. No amount of rinsing it in the water fountain changed that.

The lion cubs were still tied to the end of a cage wagon. No one was around.

"That can't be smart," Charley said.

Lisa scooted forward, arms outstretched. "Kitties!"

"Not." He scooped her into his arms, where she struggled to get free.

The lions patted at his legs and tumbled over his shoes like large puppies.

"Wanna pet!" Lisa leaned over, trying to touch the cubs. They stretched their necks upward and licked her fingers.

"They won't hurt her."

Charley started. A tall, impossibly thin and wiry older man leaned against the wagon.

"I bottle fed 'em myself. They're tame."

"They're still lions."

The guy shrugged. "She might never get another chance to pet one."

Man had a point.

Charley lowered himself to the ground, along with Lisa. The cubs licked her face, rolled into her lap, presenting their bellies for a rub. They nibbled her hair, rubbed their faces along her hand and leg, but they didn't scratch or bite.

Slowly Charley lifted his camera and began to shoot.

When the attendant had to load the cubs for their trip through the city streets, Lisa hugged them goodbye. The joy on her face . . . Charley had never seen anything like it.

"Daddy!" She threw herself into his arms and hugged him tight. "Oh, Daddy."

Next they found the clown parade, led by Ernest Borgnine

himself. The Oscar award-winning actor had become the Chief Parade Clown after Johnny Carson had asked him on The Tonight Show what he still wanted to do as an actor and Ernie had replied "I always wanted to play a clown." The parade organizers had immediately invited him to do just that at the next parade, and he'd appeared in every one since.

Charley snapped several photographs of Ernie in his familiar black hat, red gloves and checkered clown suit, as well as every other clown he could see. He worried that Lisa would be afraid of all the faces covered in greasepaint, all the big people dressed so oddly, but she waded right into the middle of the group, staring up at them in amazement. He got several pictures of that too.

The clowns were equally fascinated by her and nearly missed their parade cue because they were picking up Lisa or sitting her on their laps and showing her how they pulled handkerchiefs from their sleeves or squirted water from their boutonnieres. Her laughter drowned out any roar of the crowds in the distance.

Charley's clown essay should be nearly done after this. He couldn't wait to show Hannah the slides he'd taken today.

He managed to find a quiet corner for himself and Lisa right where the parade began. No one wanted to watch the jumble and hustle at the beginning of the parade, so they were nearly alone. They should do this every year.

They could. They would.

Lisa was nearly asleep in his arms when Frankie found them hours later.

"I thought we were meeting at the car," Charley murmured.

"I was headed that way and I saw you."

She was lying, but he let it go.

She lifted her eyebrows at their daughter's still blue lips and fingertips. Smiled at the red greasepaint one of the clowns had put on the end of her nose. Plucked a coarse, golden hair from her T-shirt. "What's this?"

"Lion cubs."

“You’ve had a big day.”

“A great day. The best day.”

Frankie peered into his face, searching, he wasn’t sure for what. But she seemed to find it because she smiled, took his hand and said, “Let’s go home.”

Six hours later he woke up screaming “Incoming!”

“Charley!” Frankie wrapped her arms around him and held on when he thrashed. “No napalm. You’re safe.”

“Goddamn it.” He ran his palm over his face. Sweaty yet again. “Same dream.”

Well, almost. This time there’d been a tiger in there too.

“They’re more than dreams.” Frankie sat up, though she didn’t let go of his hand.

A nightlight plugged into the outlet near the bathroom door lit the room. How long had that been there?

“They’re flashbacks and they seem worse.”

“They’ll fade again.”

“You believe that?”

He had to, or he’d never get any sleep at night.

“I . . . um . . . read a study on PTSD,” Frankie said.

“I don’t have—”

“You do, Charley.” She took his hand again. “You do.”