

Stickman's legacy

"Gentlemen, please be seated." The lawyer said matter-of-factly.

The four men, dressed in black suits, with two of the ties already lowered, sat in each of the chairs spread in front of the great desk. Each man arranging his chair and finding a comfortable position they faced the lawyer waiting.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming. I realize this is a solemn occasion, but I thought it best to conduct business while all of you are still in town."

He paused and looked at the lone lady sitting to the side.

"I'm sorry. This is Ginny Evans. Richard's wife. I asked her to be here."

He shuffled some papers on his desk before looking up.

"Gentlemen, how about you introduce yourselves?"

The men looked at each other for a moment, but the tall black man on the far left answered first.

"Lewis Batch."

"Joseph Murphy."

"William Hitchens."

"Donald Maguire."

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. Of course, I did know your names." The Lawyer held up a sheet of paper. "After all I called all of you here. But, I also have the names. Mr. Cool. Joe Dog. Wild Bill. The Kid. How about you match those up for me?"

The men smiled looking at each other.

"I'll be damned." Joseph Murphy said. "I haven't heard those names in quite some time."

"I'm Mr. Cool." Lewis Batch raised his hand."

"Joe Dog." Joe Murphy raised his hand.

"Wild Bill." William Hitchens raised his hand.

"The Kid." Don Maguire raised his hand.

"Why do you need to know those names?" Maguire asked.

The lawyer raised a sheet of paper in the air.

"Let me read this first. You'll understand later." He cleared his throat.

The first guy I saw when I arrived was a tall black dude. Looked mean as hell, but had a smile disarm you. I hesitantly approached him and offered my hand to shake. He put his fist out bopped the top of my hand and offered his in return. I bopped his hand. The smile came out strong. Asked me who I was and what the hell I was doing here. Before I could answer he turned to the other guys present and went down the names. Joe dog. Wild Bill. The Kid. a few others I don't remember now.

"And he's Mr. Cool." Joe Dog said. Mr. Cool flashed the smile.

"Damn. He said that? First day he came over from second platoon. We shuffled guys around. You know. We got Stickman. Dude looked like he was no

wider than a fence post. Still amazed to this day he could carry a ruck fully loaded. Damn." Lewis Batch said again.

"I should tell you, still hard for me to picture Richard Evans as Stickman." The lawyer said. "Why he must have weighted 180 at least when I first met him. Where did Stickman come from?"

"Because, he couldn't have weighted more than a hundred pounds when he hit the 'Nam." Joe Dog spoke this time. "Looked like a stickman. Not sure who first called him the name. But, it sure stuck."

"Is that why we're here? Because we were in the 'Nam together?" Maguire asked. "I mean. Really, why the hell are we here?"

The lawyer looked at each man, before looking back at his desk. "Richard Evans. Stickman. Left instructions he wanted me to take care of."

"What? Instructions?" Lewis Batch shouted. "How are we involved? I mean. Didn't he have kids? His wife is here. I don't understand."

"No children." Ginny spoke for the first time. "My fault."

She bowed her head and took a minute before she continued.

"Richard and I met in high school, but only as classmates. He was a stick then as well. Tall and lanky. I was a cheerleader. You can imagine."

She grew quiet and looked down again.

"Oh hell. Who cares now?" She took a deep breath. "Had a fling with one of the jocks. A football guy. Well, one night he convinced me to do it. So we did. Of course, I got pregnant. First time right? And I got pregnant. God punished me and all that crap. Well, my father would have skinned me alive and the jock had his career. The jock's father paid for the abortion."

A tear formed in her eye and slowly ran down her cheek. The four men and the lawyer, who sat back in his chair, all listened and waited for her to continue. She used the back of her hand to wipe away the tear. Finally took a deep breath and continued.

"Well, it went bad. I had to have the good part removed. No more children." Another deep breath. "The jock forgot about me as quickly as he impregnated me. His father offered me money to keep quiet. Which I refused by the way. Anyway, the word got out and I had to transfer schools. Hide my shame. My friends deserted me en mass. But not Richard. Not Stickman."

She took another deep breath.

"He transferred schools to be with me. Didn't care what happened or what people said. One day he came to school with scratches on his cheek and a black eye. I asked him what happened, but he wouldn't say. I found out later some guy made a crack about me being the school slut and what have you. Richard proceeded to take him down. Broke the guy's jaw and fractured the guy's right hand. Believe me the guy was no slouch. Got a rep around school after the story got out. People moved on left me alone."

She smiled broadly, wiping away another tear.

"So you two got together back then?" Lewis Batch asked.

"No." She shook her head. "Didn't even date. Although, we did go to the senior prom. Sort of together. No one else would have us. We drifted over the summer and when he got his draft notice the next year, he sought me out to see how I was doing and wished me a good life. If I need anything, you know."

She paused wringing her hands together.

"I got his mailing information from his mom when I heard he was in the 'Nam. Wrote him a letter. It took a second letter for him to write back. After the second letter he started to write me more often."

"He wrote to someone named Slim." Batch said. All he ever talked about. A girl called Slim. Wrote her damn near every day. The boy was surely in love or something. All he could talk about. Couldn't wait to get home." Lewis froze.

"Yeah. Slim was me." Ginny laughed out loud.

"Slim?" Lewis held his hands up questioning.

"My name is Virginia. Remember the cigarette. He didn't like calling me Ginny. Thought Virginia was more dignified. I thought it was old fashioned. Stickman called me Slim."

She sat back into her chair.

"Sorry, gentlemen I didn't mean to ramble on. Thought you should know the rest."

The four men looked at the lawyer.

"Yeah. Why are we here? And who the hell are you?" Joe Dog asked.

"Randy Strohmman." He looked the four men over. "That's Lieutenant Strohmman to you grunts."

"No shit? You're LT Strohmman? Second platoon?" Batch cried out.

"In the flesh soldier." Strohmman raised his hands in the air. "Hold on gentlemen. I can explain everything."

Murmurs around the room. Ginny smiled watching the boys digest this revelation. Strohmman continued to wave his hand in the air.

"Stickman. I mean Richard got into a scrape a few years back and needed a lawyer. Believe it or not he looked me up in the yellow pages. Okay, maybe more than a few years ago. Anyway, looking for a lawyer he found my name. First thing he said am I the LT from the 'Nam. I said yes. Said he'd be right over."

Nods all around. Strohmman continued.

"One night Ginny and Richard were out to dinner and an obnoxious drunk bastard somehow got wind Richard was a Vietnam Vet. Started mouthing off to him. You know the usual crap. Indiscriminate killer. Glory seeker. Coupled with the derogatory crap. Surprisingly, Richard took the abuse. But then the drunk laid hands on Ginny. Screaming how could she marry a piece of shit like him. Drunk never saw the punch come. Knocked him over two tables. Broke his jaw. Loosened several teeth and If I remember correctly broke his nose."

Ginny nodded.

"Right. Well, the guy pressed charges and threatened to sue Richard."

Strohmman sat back into his chair. Ginny smiled.

"That's where I came in. I called the guy's lawyer and informed him we were intending to file counter charges for his client laying hands on Ginny. And further, we had twenty-two witnesses, all the people in the restaurant who will testify his client acted the jerk harassing my client and especially his wife. And he's the one who started the fracas. What was his response to those facts."

Strohman looked toward Ginny who smiled and put her head down in a slight laugh.

"The drunk apologized to Richard. Revoked the charges. And paid my legal fees. Which, surprisingly doubled at that moment."

The laughs went around the room.

"Gentlemen. One of a few scrapes Richard got into since then. Mostly legal issues, but scrapes none-the-less. I've been there each time. And regrettably, I am here now."

"Listen. Stickman had his good side." Batch said. " He came when my boy was killed in a gang crossfire. Stayed with me the whole week. Stayed so long I ask my wife they had something going. She calmly walked over put her arms around Stickman's neck and ran her fingers through his hair. Said her and Richard were gonna run off together. Take her away from all this."

Lewis Batch laughed out loud, finally continued.

"Stickman had a look on his face make a deer in the headlights laugh. Made me laugh so hard I thought I was gonna wet myself. I mean the look was priceless. Priceless. Hell, I still laugh thinking about it."

Batch gathered himself and softly continued.

"We went out for a beer afterwards. Walked into a bar on the corner. He the only white dude in there. Didn't matter though. He walked in like he owned the place. Placed a fifty-dollar bill on the bar and said keep 'em coming until he says stop. Pointing to me." Batch cleared his throat. "After a couple of beers a young black kid walks up starting to mouth off. The bouncer. A guy I know. Used to play pro ball. Big man. Six and a half feet tall. Three hundred. Solid muscle. Steps in front of the kid. Says back away kid, man's a guest here. The kid took another step. Big man says now or I'll break you in two. The kid finally backed off. Hell, had I known what a bad-ass Stickman was I'd a let it be."

Strohman started to speak, but Joe Dog spoke first.

"Stickman pulled me out of a drunk tank, Got me into rehab. Lost my first wife to the bottle. Lost just about everything else. Stickman hung in with me. Got me dried out and found me a job. Came to my second wedding. Where I met Ginny for the first time. Hell of a man you had there Slim. Hell of a man."

Joe Dog looked up to the ceiling.

"Love you brother."

"Thank you Joe." Ginny said. "Wild Bill you know you need to tell your story. Now is the time. Please."

"Oh hell. You guys know what I'm gonna say. I mean." Wild Bill said.

"Now Wild Bill. You know you need to tell your story." Ginny said.

"Look, when my kid told me he was gay, I about died. I mean. I'm Wild Bill damnit. No kid of mine." William Hitchens sobbed. "My wife called Stickman, said she needed his help. Stickman was there the next day. I screamed. He yelled. We talked all night. How could this happen to me. Stickman said it didn't happen to me. It happened. Now live with it. Make the best of it. It's your kid man. He's still your kid."

The room was quiet waiting for Wild Bill to continue.

"I finally talked to my kid. I talked to him for two days. Richard stayed. Sat outside the whole time and waited. I walked out on the porch and after I cussed him out. I said thanks."

William Hitchens looked at the others.

"You all came to the wedding. You know. If not for Stickman there wouldn't have been no wedding. I still have a hard time saying my son's husband. But, he is a great guy. We get along okay. Hell, I really like the guy. Makes my son happy. What more could a father want. I swear to God if not for Stickman I would have disowned him." He sighed heavily. "Hey Batch, I'm jealous he didn't buy me no beer after."

Laughter filled the room. All eyes turned to Donald Maguire. The Kid.

"When Stickman heard about my wife, He came running. Stayed with me off and on while she went through the treatments. The cancer took her body, but not her spirit. I could hear them laughing in the hospital room while the doctors pumped her with chemo."

Maguire took a real deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Stickman stayed with me the whole week after she passed. Helped me with the arrangements. The paperwork after. Made me get out of bed everyday, shower, get dressed and do something. Kept me moving. Kept me alive. I bought him something stronger than a beer. And more than one."

Maguire stopped and looked straight at Ginny.

"What did you think he was gone all the time looking after us? I mean."

"Like I could have stopped him." Ginny smiled. "More like I wanted to go with him. And sometimes I did, but stayed in the shadows."

The room got quiet again.

"Okay Strohman, why the hell are we here?' Batch asked.

Randy Strohman Looked to Ginny first, who nodded. He picked up a set of papers off the desk, cleared his throat and began.

"Richard Evans wrote a manuscript. The front third covers your days in Vietnam together. I read you a small passage earlier. Manuscript mentions me, if you can believe it. But, mostly it covers the years after the 'Nam. Your years. My years. His years. It's a story about you. About us. About him. The book is simply titled: *Is there life after the 'Nam*"

"He wrote a manuscript? About us?" Wild Bill screamed.

"Yeah. What's it about?" Joe Dog barked.

"Alright, I'll bite. What gives?" The Kid asked softly.

"Where you going with this?' Mr. Cool pushed.

"Okay. Now that I have your attention. Let me first say the manuscript is finished."

"Yeah. And what are you going to do with it?" Lewis Batch persisted.

"Nothing. It is already done." Strohman said. "The manuscript has been sold to a publisher. By me. I repped it. Got a one-hundred thousand dollar advance. And." He raised his hand in the air. "And. I am in negotiations for the movie version of said book."

The look on each of their faces suggested he continue.

"Now listen guys. There is a lot to discuss here, so how about you let me finish before your questions and maybe I can."

"How about you tell us what the hell is going on here. We didn't know anything about no goddamn book." Wild Bill stood up placing his hands on the front of the desk.

Strohman sat back in his chair not sure how to proceed. Ginny spoke up.

"Gentlemen. Please. If I may?"

She stood up and sat on the front of the desk. Slowly Wild Bill sat down.

"My husband. Richard. Stickman. Had these notebooks, diaries, note pads filled with writing going all the way back to his days in the 'Nam. He kept writing all through the years since. I found the box one day and asked him what they were. Of course, he said they were nothing. I let it be. But, while he was on those trips helping you guys. I started reading those notes. They were heart-warming, sensitive passages of what he saw, felt and generally his thoughts each time he wrote."

Ginny went back to her chair. Strohman relaxed finally.

"I'm the one who put those notebooks, diaries, note pads and other scraps of paper in order. I told him we should do something with them. He blew me off. Said it was stupid stuff. Just thoughts he had and notes he made. None of it worth the time. I took it upon myself to start typing the words into the computer. I tried giving him the first pages. But again, he brushed it aside. I got mad. Yelled at him. Made him tell my why not."

Ginny got quiet. Put her head down. Wiped away a tear.

"He said it was too painful to remember. Said his life after the 'Nam didn't have much to show for. Said he did his life in the "Nam. I told him he was an idiot. His life after the 'Nam was his best years. His life in the 'Nam was how he met you guys. Although, memorable times, enabled him to have the years after with you guys. He stopped screaming for a moment and maybe even heard what I said. But, once again, he blew me off. Said he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Said rather loudly. I should forget about those note books."

Ginny stood up. Paced across the office. Strohman watched her, trying to decide if he should talk yet. The men followed her with their eyes.

"So what happened next?" Batch said.

"Yeah. What happened." Hitchens said.

"There must be more." Maguire said.

"Please. Tell us." Murphy said. "Please."

Ginny looked at each man. At Strohman and nodded.

"Okay." She said softly. "Okay. As you all know, he was diagnosed with cancer. Later stages of lung cancer. He had quit smoking years ago. But it seemed like everybody he knew still smoked. Certainly his family. The place where he worked. Most of the guys he knew. Guys like you all smoked. The doctor said he had it growing for years. Finally broke through. No one to blame. Fact of life."

Ginny put her head down. Took a deep breath and looked at Maguire.

"We started the chemo regimens. The doctor visits. The grind as he called it. One day he came to me. Sat right next to me on the sofa. Asked if I still had those typed pages. By this time I had most of the notes typed. He said he'd like to see them now. I took some out of the box and handed the first pile to him. He took the pages outside on the back deck. I didn't see him again until dinner time. He didn't say a word. A couple of days later he asked if I had finished the books yet. Were there still more note books to go."

Ginny got up and walked across the office again.

"I would find him in the middle of the night making notes on the pages. Crossing out lines and rewriting them. Making notes in the margins. I would quietly take those pages and type the changes. Print out new pages and leave those on the table."

Ginny walked back across the office standing on the other side.

"This went on for sometime. His condition worsened. I would find him curled up on the sofa, pages strewn across him and the floor. In the guest bedroom. Same picture. Once, spread out on the floor. Pages everywhere. I thought for a moment. He moaned. I left him there. The next morning he put the pile of pages on the table next to me. Got a cup of coffee and left the kitchen."

Ginny finally sat back down.

"I brought a final draft to Strohman and asked him to see what he could do with it. Maybe get a publisher to have a look."

Ginny sighed deeply.

"Two days before Stickman died, Strohman called and said he sold the manuscript to a publisher for a one-hundred thousand dollar advance. He told Strohman to make sure the guys. Mr. Cool. Joe Dog. Wild Bill. And The Kid. Get all of the advance and any future proceeds. It is their story. They deserve it. All of it. After he hung up, Stickman told me to tell the guys he did his best for them. He loved them all. And to say there is life after the 'Nam."

The overwhelming emotions hung in the air. No one ready to speak yet.

"Gentlemen. I'll let Strohman take it from here. He has all the details. I'm sure you can ask questions after, but please give him your attention. Thank you for listening."

The men turned their focus to Strohman.

"Gentlemen. Let's start with the basics. First, as Ginny said all proceeds from the sale of the manuscript, less my fees, is to be paid to you four, divided equally, which, of course, means a twenty-five percent share. Should one of more of you pass away in the future, shares return to the survivors and any future

proceeds would be divided accordingly. Should all of you pass away in the future, the rights return back to Virginia Evans as Richard Evans' heir."

Strohman shuffled more papers.

"Ownership of the manuscript will be granted to you four. Any future sales of the work, such as movie rights. I should say up front those are already in the works. But, any further sale of rights will be at your discretion. I would be more than happy to continue to represent the manuscript for you moving forward. However, you have the right to chose you own representation. Individual, if you prefer. The choice is yours. of course."

"Jesus. Can we skip all this lawyer crap?" Batch interjected. "Any of you guys have a problem with LT handling this thing for us? No? Okay. That's settled. What else you got LT?"

"Can any of us see the manuscript before it's published? Maguire asked.

"Yes. I can provide each of you with a copy if you would like." Strohman said. "But, I don't think you can make any changes."

"No changes? What the hell do you mean no changes?" Hitchens yelled.

"I'm sure you can suggest changes to passages that may not sit right with you, but no. The manuscript has been sold as is. The only changes will go to Ginny for retype. Typos, grammar, stuff like that. But, seriously. If there is something of a legal nature, maybe I can see what I can do."

"Ginny." Batch looked at her. "Is there anything we need to worry about? I mean. I gotta believe Stickman would not do wrong by us? What do you say? You read it? What say you?"

Ginny smiled.

"Yes, I did read it. I think you guys will love it. If anything, Stickman focused more on you guys more than himself. Strohman you read the manuscript. What did you think."

"I agree with Ginny. I believe he did right by you all. If anyone took a hit it was Stickman. He sure played down his part in all this. I believe the best I can say is, he showed what happened to five guys who survived the 'Nam, but more importantly survived life after the 'Nam. There really is nothing more to be said about the manuscript. Maybe, you guys should read the manuscript before you pass judgment."

Nods all around. The room quiet for a moment.

"Alright Gentlemen. I have paperwork here for you to sign passing ownership of the manuscript to you four. Lewis Batch, Mr. Cool. Joseph Murphy, Joe Dog. William Hitchens, Wild Bill. Donald Maguire, The Kid."

"Wait a minute." Hitchens said. "Are you saying you are sitting on a hundred grand belongs to us four once we sign those papers?"

"No." Strohman shook his head. "I said the advance was for one-hundred thousand dollars. However, it will be paid out in thirds. One third up front. One third when the final draft is delivered. One third when the book is published. The first third will be distributed as soon as I get all the paperwork finished."

"Want to say it again in English?" Batch said.

"Sure. Once I get the paperwork done and presented to the publisher, they will authorize the first one third payment, which I will distribute to you four less my legal fees."

"And just what are your fees?" Hitchens questioned.

"The usual rate for this kind of service is fifteen percent, but I told Richard I would do twelve percent, give you guys more of the pie. Any other questions?" Strohmman set the papers down. Each man signed the document.

"Next. I have papers retaining me to represent the manuscript in future transactions. I will also collect and distribute any proceeds for the sale of rights as well as subsequent royalties."

Strohmman set the papers down. Each man signed the document.

"I believe those will do for now. Any other questions?"

"Yes." Donald Maguire said. "What about Ginny? Doesn't she get any of the manuscript money? I mean. How come she's left out?"

Strohmman sat back and looked at Ginny.

"You want to take the question?"

"Richard and I agreed early on we would have no stake in any of this. The manuscript should belong to you four now. And that is the way Richard wanted it. He said it was for you. About you. And done for you all."

Ginny raised her hand.

"Really guys. I'm okay. Richard took care of me. I'll be fine. Just invite me to the move premier. I'd sure appreciate the opportunity to sit with you all during the showing."

"Gentlemen. If there is nothing else. I believe we are adjourned."

Strohmman got up from his chair and walked around the desk. He shook hands with each of the guys. And in turn, they all hugged Ginny. Lewis Batch took Ginny's hand.

"You need anything. You know who to call. You hear?"

Ginny kissed him on the cheek

Lewis Batch, William Hitchens, Joseph Murphy and Donald Maguire walked out the door. As the door closed, Strohmman turned to Ginny.

"You okay? Do you need anything?"

"No. I'm fine. Really. I'll be okay."

"I think the manuscript you wrote should be Stickman's legacy."

"I wrote?"

"Virginia Evans. Slim. You may have fooled the guys. But, I know better. Last time I talked with Richard, he had no idea what I was talking about. After some prodding, he said. You mean the typed notes Slim is working on? Whatever are you going to do with those? Nothing there but some scribbling I did years ago. Hell, I don't even want to read those pages."

"What ever do you mean, Randy? The manuscript was purely Richard's idea. He did all the work."

"I'm sure he did. But, you made the work a functioning manuscript. All one has to do is read the damn thing and they can see it has a woman's touch. I'm

not complaining you understand. I mean. I sold the manuscript. All I'm saying is you deserve some credit for your efforts. Why did you give all the proceeds to the four guys? Why not keep some for yourself?"

"Why. It was Richard's wish to do so. He suggested it."

"No." Strohman shook his head. "When I mentioned to Richard about the proceeds for the manuscript, he said. 'What the hell are you talking about? Just give all that crap to the guys. I don't need those anymore.' He signed the papers, but had no idea what or why he signed."

"Are you going to say anything to the guys? I mean. Well, I don't think."

"I'm your lawyer Slim. I'll do whatever you want me to do. But, please don't pretend with me. Remember, your secret will always be safe with me."

"You promise? The secret always will stay with us?"

"I'll make sure of it. The paperwork already says it."

"Strohman, thank you. Richard said I could trust you. Said to be upfront with you. You would understand. He still had most of his faculties when he said it. Richard didn't know I finished the pages when he lost interest. When the chemo treatments became intense. He lost interest in a lot of life. I tried to make him as comfortable as I could. I hope you understand."

"Yes I do. Of course, I do. I know what you did for Richard. I might even say you did this for Richard. And for the guys. What a great gift you have given them all."

"Not me. Richard Evans gave them this gift."

Strohman reached for her and hugged her. She sobbed into his shoulder. He patted her back and said just above a whisper

"The manuscript will always be Stickman's legacy. Always."