



THE PHILIPPINE FILE

by
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PROLOGUE

The President of the Philippines placed his palms on the top of his desk and rose to face the man who dared argue with him.

“You say it was General Ver?” he angrily asked. “How could you possibly consider General Ver? He has been my best friend. When we were just children we fought the Japanese together. After the war we both supported the new democracy.”

He paused for breath. His once full and wavy black hair had long ago been replaced by a graying sparseness that failed to conceal his blood pressure. Each pulse bulged his temple arteries as he struggled with his self-control.

“And when the HUKs came,” he continued the defense of his friend. “We fought them together. When it came time to save the country by forming the new government, who did he

He stopped his tirade. He returned to his seat. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his support?”

forehead. He felt harried. He was tired and worn. His years in command of his government were taking its toll. Desperation was often becoming his only solace these recent years.

For several minutes nothing was heard but the air conditioner groaning its constant struggle against the sweltering Manila summer.

“My....” he began anew, then stopped. He peered at the man who was causing his anger. His reason again took charge. He changed his tone. “When I entered politics I told General Ver that he would be the best man to take over the government, that he was the strongest, the best leader. The people knew his name, they knew his love for his country, their country. They were his people.”

Again he paused, this time gazing out the palace window that overlooked his garden, the prize of his idle hours. He contemplated the garden, thought about his blood pressure, and forced himself to gain control of his anger.

“But General Ver wouldn’t have it,” he continued, now more confined in his passion. “He said I was the politician. I had to be the one for the people to lean on because I was the one with the ability to deal with the politicians.”

His gaze turned to his ornately carved teak desk. He focused on the delicately carved gold and ivory mini-saber letter opener neatly placed beside his desk pad. It was always on the desk in

front of him. It was a reminder. He picked it up. He examined it. He examined the many memories emotionally etched across the blade. It was a memento from the same general who was now in question.

He placed the letter opener down and concentrated on the man confronting him, who was sitting so casually in the chair facing his desk.

Is that a smirk, he asked himself. Is there a touch of contempt in that expression? He suddenly had a strong dislike for the ambitions of this man. He nearly glared at him before continuing. "The General would never cross me," he said. "He would never do anything as stupendously idiotic as that which you claim."

The man who argued with the President, the only man with enough power to argue with him, was E. Aguinaldo Vallerga. He was the Chief Counsel, and also the head of the Central Intelligence Services, the much feared Philippine P.I.S. And his perseverance was undaunted. He had tasted the blood of success. "But the people are asking..." he began, sure of himself. Then he paused. He rethought his approach, and forced himself to be more conciliatory. Such a manner was needed when the President got angry. It was his ability to read his President that enabled him to rise to his position of power.

"Yes. That is true," Vallerga continued at length. "Everything you said is true. It all happened with you and the General. You and he are dedicated to the people and the Philippines. The people were all that you two considered." He changed his position in his chair, using the interlude to carefully consider his next words. "But that was over forty years ago. You were both young men. You were idealistic." He paused again. "But the people of that time are not the people of this time. This is 1983. The people of this time have been pampered, spoiled by the fruits of democracy, spoiled by the fruits of the seeds you planted, spoiled by being allowed to question their government. They have been spoiled by the rights and freedoms you have guaranteed them."

The President glared. "And you would prefer they were not given such a golden apple as freedom of choice?" His expression was full of sarcasm, dangerous in its tone.

Vallerga got out of his chair and walked to the window to gaze at the President's flower garden. He had to allow the President a few minutes to relax, to regain control. He took the minutes to marvel at the beds of black roses, then at length, turned to continue his thrust. "No," he said. "I would not argue with your wisdom on that matter. But the people of this time are young. They don't understand what you and the General have done for them. They have no such memories. They know the assassination was nothing less than premeditated murder and they are asking why you have not come forth with an inquiry. 'Why hasn't the President held an open inquiry to prove General Ver was not associated with the assassination of Benigno Aquino?' they ask. They answer that the only way you can prove that he, and you by way of ordering him, weren't involved, is for you to put him in front of the courts where he can prove his innocence."

"He is innocent!" the President asserted.

Vallerga glanced at his President. Did he detect a weakness in the facade of confidence? "You and I know that," he continued. "But the people do not."

"I cannot ask that of my friend," the President responded. His resolve was not so strong, now. It never was lastingly strong before such a persistent onslaught from his powerful counselor. He often wished he had not appointed Vallerga to such a position, for it included unrestricted access to the Presidency. That access taught Vallerga the methods used in controlling the country, methods

that only the President should know.

In the privacy of his own quarters he would confide to his wife that Vallerga knows how to use such delicate information. “It is my fear,” he had said, “that someday Vallerga will use that information for his own greed instead of for the good of the country. I’m sure he will try to use it against me. I must keep a sharper eye on him.” And now Vallerga was coming close to justifying that fear.

“As always,” the President resumed in a relenting tone. “Your reasoning has proven itself.” He was tiring of the argument. He wanted to end it without conceding the point. “Yes,” he added. “I will speak to General Ver, but I will speak to him in private. I will do this before I’ll give any consideration to having an open inquiry. I owe him that.”

Vallerga smiled with satisfaction. “And then you will announce an open inquiry?” he asked.

“Then I might have an open inquiry,” the President corrected. He decided he would let Vallerga gloat over this slightest of victories. To do so wouldn’t cause any harm.

He later wondered if he had made the right choice.

CHAPTER 1

It was one week before the argument between President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and his Chief Counsel, that Penn Gwinn drove south on Highway 101 from San Rafael, California, heading for San Francisco. He was on his way to work another case, one that required an early evening surveillance.

The late afternoon’s sun setting over nearby Mount Tamalpais glared through his car’s windshield. He squinted his blue eyes, and shifted his weight in defense of the seat belt. He hated seat belts. In his decades of driving in city traffic he hadn’t yet needed the thing, and he didn’t expect he would need it in the future. The only reason he fastened it in the first place was because he had to pass a cruising Highway Patrol car several minutes earlier. When he did, the patrolman glanced at him, checking his speed and noting the belt’s use.

Penn wasn’t speeding - the cop was traveling slower than the normal pace - but had the belt not been fastened, the cop would have had a reason for making a traffic stop. An improperly fastened seat belt citation carried a thirty-dollar fine, and Penn didn’t have thirty dollars to waste. Besides, being stopped by a cop was the last thing he wanted that afternoon.

Once past the patrolman, he unfastened the belt, and returned his thoughts to his Great American Detective Novel. He fancied himself a writer. He knew he had the material for such a great work, for the definitive novel on the realities of being a Private Investigator, and his mental writing kept his mind active. Some times he used a portable tape recorder to take notes.

“Viewed from the Marin Headlands,” he recorded, “the sliver of summer fog pierced the city’s peaks and valleys, buildings and alleys.”

He considered the phrase. He didn’t like it, but went on, thinking he could always rewrite.

“Inside the city the fog covered the night. Its quieting dampness muted the music of the streets,

transforming it to a meaningless, mindless cacophony. It changed one's mood, turning calm reverie to alert anxiety. A cat's keenness would be needed this night."

He paused, and glanced into his rear view mirror to check on the cop, more in need to let his phrases settle than in concern with getting a ticket. The black and white cruiser was a number of cars behind, no longer a worry, so he played the tape, and intently listened. He wasn't very impressed by what he heard.

He rewound the tape and tossed the recorder on the seat. He wiped his palm over what was left of his close cropped blond hair, subconsciously noting the progress of inevitable male pattern baldness, and expressed his frustration with his writing in a typically male manner: He stomped down on the gas pedal. His 1978 Monte Carlo with an overpowered 454 cubic inch Pontiac Trans-Am engine lunged forward, as though it was anxious to be set free, longing to be free of the hobbles of speed limits. That's why he affectionately called it the Red Beast.

After rechecking the rear view mirror, he found only one thing of interest. It was an all black Ford sedan closing on him. He scrutinized it, assuring himself it was merely a tail-gater and not an unmarked police car. After all, by that time he was going well over 70 mph.

Several minutes later, when he entered the Waldo Tunnel at the top of the grade, he again glanced in his mirror. The black Ford was still behind him. The driver was staying right on his bumper, apparently not the least bit interested in passing. What the hell's on that nut's mind, he asked himself as the Ford kept pace with him through the tunnel.

Then, as if the driver had a sudden change of mind, the Ford vaulted ahead, passing on the downhill curve out of the tunnel. It moved quickly in and out of traffic, not slowing even when it got into the speed control lanes of the Golden Gate Bridge.

At first Penn thought the car might have been following him, though he wouldn't have been able to reason why anyone would want to, but the driver hadn't glanced over while passing. "It must be the paranoia of the profession," he reconciled, aloud. "The guy probably didn't know what he was doing. Most of the drivers in this county are half brained, anyway."

As he approached the bridge, he let the concept of being half-brained float around in his mind. It bounced, rattled, and finally landed on aspects of his present case. He tried analyzing the relevant facts as he drove onto the Golden Gate Bridge, but found he couldn't concentrate. The black Ford had tripped the wire of his anxieties.

What's wrong with you, he asked himself. He felt jumpy, nervous, and he couldn't understand why. This is just another domestic case, he argued. Isn't it? It's nothing to get excited about. And that black Ford means nothing.

The anxiety remained, though, and it was heightened when he recalled the recent incident involving he and partner, PZ. The two of them had emerged from the client's office after getting this particular case. They were both wondering how they were going to spend their half of the meager \$500 retainer, when, just as they stepped off the curb, a car raced past, nearly running over them. That car had been an all black Ford, too.

Penn was in a mid-span lane change in the middle of the bridge when a thunderous blast from beside his ear jolted his thoughts. It scattered them and replaced them with adrenaline filled survival instincts. "God damn fog horn!" he shouted. "Only a half brained engineer would design a channel marking system on a bridge with a horn next to the traffic lanes."

He was surprised by how his hands trembled. It took another quarter of the bridge span before

he regained his composure. “PZ and I must have been half brained to take this case in the first place.”

He was beginning to wish they had turned the case down. He was wishing that, because he particularly didn’t like meddling around in domestic cases, in someone’s dirty underwear. The results always stunk. Hadn’t he and PZ planned to limit their work to insurance claims investigations? Hadn’t they planned to stay in a field where they knew they would get paid for their work at a fair price, rather than with a measly retainer up front and a fight for the final payment after the case was over?

It was always a fight for the money on a domestic case. After all the information the investigator worked hard as hell to collect is amassed, and after all the truths are worked out and are reported to the client, the client invariably doesn’t want to pay for it. Clients don’t want to know the truth. The truth makes them angry, and they refuse to pay the bill.

At least with insurance work there’s no worry about the client’s checks taking the rubber leap at the bank like most domestic client’s checks do, he said, arguing with himself. Even like most attorneys’ checks do on domestic cases, he added to his argument.

He glanced behind him to change lanes as he neared the end of the bridge.

Domestics are always a rat race, he returned to his argument, secure in his lane change.

But, I guess, when one has to eat, half of \$500 on a domestic is better than no money at all, pride or not.

That was the one flaw in the business plan of the Flyin’ Penguin Detective Agency. Even insurance companies run out of cases to assign, at times. When that happened it was back to the telephones and solicitation calls, even to attorneys, for business. He hated doing that, but he had to admit its necessity.

It was just such a solicitation call that developed the lead on this particular client. It was a referral from one of the less reliable attorneys they knew. This client, though, seemed to have money, and his check probably won’t bounce; a rationalization Penn had used when taking the case. This client is a moderately successful stockbroker. Maybe things would be different this time.

At the San Francisco end of the Golden Gate Bridge, his thoughts were interrupted by the toll-taker. The female money-grabber frowned her impatience while Penn rummaged through his pockets to retrieve the requisite homage to the Bridge Gods, those money mongers otherwise known as the Golden Gate Bridge District Board of Trustees.

He ignored the drivers lined up behind him, but he did notice a black Ford that entered the tollbooth beside him. That can’t be the same Ford that passed me in the tunnel, he mused. He kept his eye on it anyway, as he pulled away from the toll booth, and noted there were two men in it.

No, he continued his argument. It can’t be the same car. There weren’t two men in the other one. At least I don’t think there were. Half a mile from the toll booth he forced the black Ford from his mind, and resumed his thoughts on the present case, on where he was going.

He took the 19th Avenue off ramp, and entered the residential area off California Street. He parked his well-worn Red Beast near a very exclusive residence in the Presidio Terrace area by the designated starting time of 6:00 p.m.

After settling in for the dullest part of private investigating, the long hours of surveillance part, he tried to justify his efforts once again with thoughts of his half of the meager retainer still

burning a hole in his pocket. Maybe he would buy Lara something nice, for a change, he mused. She deserves it for putting up with him.