

# Chapter One

This is the truth of what happened to Ysa, Kit and Soong Tan in Amazonia. The reporters didn't get the whole story, not by a long shot. The American consulate in Belém released only the official information, which is to say nothing. The officials probably knew more than they reported. They didn't mention the rain of porpoises or anybody getting sawed in half or the three crude coffins, small, medium and large. They alluded to a plane crash but not as a cause of death. Nothing about a war.

If it were anyone but Ysa, it would sound like a make-believe adventure movie, the kind made for TV. But somehow she really got herself involved in such situations. A couple of years ago, for example, she found herself going to Burma and parachuting out of an airplane disguised as a nun. But, quite un-nun-like, she knocked off the biggest drug lord in the world, rescued the prettiest little girl you ever saw, and ended up the arms of Mr. Perfect. He moved right in. They didn't get married, but they're shacked up like married people except that when they had sex, they made love, too.

9GLENN CHENEY

The little Dutch-Burmese girl, the green-eyed Soong Tan, went right into the sixth grade. Ysa got a job identifying microbes in a pathology lab. Kit quit his job as a not-for-profit commando and opened up an ice cream stand off Virginia Route 169. Kit's Kones. Incredible place. A hundred and forty-four flavors. Blueberry- mango. Guava and cheese. Cinnamon-pumpkin. Bourbon. Bourbon and cloves. Cloves and cranberries. You'd weigh five hundred pounds before you tasted all his flavors. People came all the way from Washington, sometimes even whole busloads of people. He had congressmen in there. Senators. Ambassadors. Generals. People came to have an ice cream cone just to see who else was having an ice cream cone. He'd have a whole mess of famous people sitting around picnic tables, licking their cones and blotting ice cream off their shirts. And it wasn't cheap ice cream. Kit made so much in the summer that he could afford to take the winter off.

Last winter he got a call from his foster-brother. *Edgar*. The last guy in the world named *Edgar*. Edgar lived in Brazil, right on the mouth of the Amazon in a city called Belém. Edgar had a Brazilian wife named Elizama. Kit hadn't heard from Edgar in years. Now all of a sudden Edgar just *had* to talk to him. He had big plans. He was going to get rich. He wouldn't tell Kit what it was. He wanted him to come down to Brazil and see it first-hand. Kit said, "This better not be some Amway deal," and Edgar said, "Amway's nothing compared to this."

Well, it was winter and Soong Tan had two weeks off for Easter and Ysa said she'd always wanted to see the Amazon. She packed safari shorts, half a dozen T-shirts, malaria pills, a blank diary book, a camera, binoculars for watching birds, a magnifying glass for weird insects, a little field microscope for tropical germs, a telescope in case there was an eclipse or something, a ten-pound first aid kit in case there was a war, enough other junk for Kit to consider taking a camel for their baggage. She

called her friend Susan and said, "Can you watch my ferrets for a couple of weeks? I'm going up the Amazon."

Susan said, "The *Amazon*. Are you *nuts*?" 10

"I need to get away from civilization," she said. "Just for a while. I want to see how the planet used to be."

So the next thing you know they're on their way. Varig Airlines down to Rio. Some rattletrap puddle-jumper up to Belém. Susan pictured the plane with vines and boa constrictors hanging off the wings. She could just see Soong Tan's round, Oriental face pressed up against the window, all wide-eyed and saying "Like, *wow*." But then a postcard from Ysa said it wasn't all that bad in Brazil. They were about halfway civilized, in the cities anyway. It was when you get out into the interior that you found your boa constrictors, anacondas, and pythons. Your alligators. Your piranha. Your malaria, yellow fever, elephantiasis, jungle rot and everything else the human body can catch.

So of course Ysa went there. She wasn't worried. She had Kit.

She also had the kind of looks that let a girl get away with murder. Being of Dutch-Norwegian stock, she had green eyes and yellow hair. Being the kind of person with a little discipline at the refrigerator, she kept her feisty little butt in shape. She was the kind who, when she smiled, everybody just trusted her and liked her. Guys started clowning around. Women wanted to tell her their problems. Kids wanted to tell her stories about their little lives. Traffic cops let her go with a warning.

Yet she was nice. A regular person. She liked a cold beer on a hot day. She cut coupons. Sometimes her car didn't start. She got headaches.

Anyway, she and Kit and little Soong Tan made it to Belém without the plane crashing or anything. Edgar met them at the airport. They were two degrees south of the equator. The humidity was like something from dinosaur times but with garbage in the streets and a big outdoor fish market right downtown. Susan got a postcard that said it was like walking through clam chowder. Not that Ysa would ever break a sweat or anything. Not her. Not Kit. They looked like a deodorant commercial coming across the airport lobby, as fresh as a mouthful of Scope.

Edgar looked like Larry the Lounge Lizard in his flowery shirt 11

unbuttoned halfway down his golden-brown chest and great gobs of 14-karat gold chain swinging around his neck. He was all over Kit with the handshakes and hugs and pats on the back. Ysa wrote in her diary that it felt like getting hugged by a reptile in a wet fur coat. He had yellow teeth and smelled like a half-empty cup of coffee that's been used as an ashtray. He had a kind of hatchet face with a nose that had steep sides and tall, deep nostrils which in certain light you could see up inside.

This was the first time Kit had seen him since Edgar left home and joined the Marines. Kit was just a foster kid in the house, three or four years younger than Edgar. The parents treated Kit like dirt.

Edgar treated him like a gnat. So as soon as he could, Kit pulled an Edgar, except what he joined was the Army. Edgar ended up being a cook at Parris Island. Kit ended up in Special Forces in Southeast Asia.

But first thing at the airport, Edgar bellows out, “Yo, bro!” and starts with the Brazilian-style back-slaps.

Kit backs off for a conventional hand-shake and just says, “Hello, Edgar. Long time no see.”

“Boy, you can say that again, little brother. When was it?”

“A good twenty years ago. You were seventeen and full of pimples and had the grubbiest little mustache I ever saw.”

“Haw! Time sure goes by, doesn’t it? I could barely remember what you looked like. I had this memory of somebody about four feet tall who needed his nose wiped.”

“Well,” Kit says, “it’s been wiped.”

“Haw, haw, haw!” More back-slaps. Edgar loves his little brother. Suddenly they’ve been the best of bros since day one. Kit keeps giving Ysa looks of complete disgust. When he introduces her, Edgar not only moves in for a real tight hug but also, she’s sure, feels around for her bra strap.

She pulls away and turns his attention to Soong Tan.

“What a little cutie-pie,” he says, pinching one of her chubby little cheeks. “Jeepers, creepers, where’d you get them peepers, kid?”

The source of her pretty green peepers was a long story. Ysa 12

didn’t go into it. She just smiled wanly and said, “So do you have a car here or what?”

Edgar takes them home in his Fiat. He’s got a big apartment in a building that looks to Ysa like a concrete block with windows. The apartment’s got four bedrooms *plus* a bedroom for the live-in maid. Edgar never finished high school, but he’s got a live-in maid. He snaps his fingers and the maid comes running. He says, “A little more ice for my drink, Maria,” and she brings it. Even if the apartment were on fire, he wouldn’t have to drag his heels off the coffee table. He could just snap his fingers and say, “Maria, would you put out that fire, please?”

Susan got a post card from Soong Tan, written on one of those first days in Brazil. All it said was, “Dear Aunt Susan: It is incredibly boring here. Hot, humid and nothing to do. TV sucks here. Why did they bring me to such a place? Why do people even live here? I don’t get it. Yours truly, Soong Tan.”

Ysa sent Susan a letter describing Elizama, Edgar’s wife. It fit the stereotype of Brazilian women except without the fruit in the hair. Very tan. Very bright red lipstick so powerful it stained her big white teeth. Very curvaceous body, especially around the rump. A little heavy on the hips, maybe, but she moved them around like a professional. Great gobs of black hair. Nails to die for. Matching toenails. Lots of flashy rings on all her fingers. Jeans meant for women who get lots of exercise. She had big dark eyes that stretched waaaay open when something amazed her and that narrowed down to the size of snake eyes when she had something dark and personal to share.

Elizama had the apartment decorated all weird with Umbanda stuff. Umbanda, Ysa explained in the letter to Susan, is a religion that got brought over from Africa by the slaves. Then it mixed with Catholicism to create bizarre gods and goddesses named after the saints but in charge of things like the sea, the sky, bad luck, lightning, and stuff. When believers worship, they burn candles and incense and go into trances and sacrifice chickens and practice voodoo. Edgar and Elizama didn't believe in it. They just had the stuff for

decoration all over their walls and hanging from the ceiling and lurking on whatnot shelves. They had swordfish bills, porpoise eyes, dried monkey feet, rattles made from bones. And crucifixes. No air conditioning. Just ceiling fans. A little breeze came off the river, which is about ten miles wide there. Sometimes a rain storm would pass by and cool things off a bit. Ysa and Kit just sat around the apartment feeling like a couple of damp rags. It took all their energy just to snap their fingers for Maria to bring more ice.

Edgar treated them well. Big meals. Tours of the town. Juices they'd never heard of. Fresh Brazilian coffee in tiny little cups. Elizama took Ysa out to have her fingernails done right and her body hair waxed so she could go to the beach in one of the itsty-bitsy tangas they wear in Brazil. *Dental floss*, they call it. Because it gets down into the crack.

While Ysa was getting herself tuned up to Brazilian standards, Edgar took Kit to a whore house. Not a bordello or anything. Just a whore house. Plain as can be. It reminded him of the lobby of a college dorm back in the days when college was cheap. He said he was afraid even to touch the walls. The lobby was just plastic chairs and drunk guys sitting around waiting to get laid. The closest thing to a frill was a humongous gumball machine over in the corner. It was the kind that's six feet tall with flashing lights and a million gumballs. When you buy one it rolls down a long winding chute inside a clear column under the globe of gumballs. Kit found that very weird. He never seen a gumball machine like that, and he never imagined he'd first see one in Brazil. And on top of that, he wondered, who would go into a whore house for a gumball? He figured it was probably for the girls. Whore are always chewing gum, right? He'd never thought of it before, but it kind of made sense. A whore house would have to have a supply of gum. But it was weird, this big thing standing there in the corner like some kind of a Martian with a huge head full of multicolored brainballs.

Edgar makes like he practically owns the place. "Take your pick," he says, calling out a parade of girls who didn't look old enough to vote. "Vanilla. Milk chocolate. Licorice. We've got 'em all here.

Twelve dollars each. Buy two, get one free." He wasn't talking gumball flavors. Kit backed off. He didn't need to hire a girl. He had Ysa. She was gorgeous. Hair the color of white corn. The prettiest face in the world and legs that bring men to their knees. Her breasts look like something off a marble statue. Kit wasn't going to mess with some chick who probably had more diseases than a hospital.

So Edgar says, "OK then, be a chicken, see if I care. I've got a little business to attend to with my sweetheart here —" and he strokes this half-naked teenager who looks like she just got off the boat from

Africa. “If you want, you can go across the street and have a beer, I’ll be there pretty soon. The word’s *cerveja*.”

And off goes Edgar with his sweetheart. Kit has nothing against beer on a hot day, but before he goes, he plops a coin into the gumball machine, just to see how it works. It takes him a while to figure out the right coin, but it turns out to be a 25-centavo piece, same as in America. He gives the knob a whirl, and a yellow gumball drops down from the globe and starts down the chute, around and around and around. Something trips off a kind of a little siren, a pinwheel up on top spins around, whistling and shooting off sparks, and the yellow ball of gum pops out a little door down near his ankles and rolls across the floor. Kit almost falls down laughing. It’s the fanciest gumball machine in the world, and there it is, in a grubby little whore house on the outskirts of the Amazon jungle.

So he’s across the street drinking Brahma beer and trying to fit all this on a postcard when Edgar comes out with a great big smile on his face. Kit thinks that’s odd. Men don’t usually smile when they’re done with a whore. They’re always sad. But Edgar’s got this big grin across the front of his head. He sits down at the table with Kit—it’s a little metal table out on the sidewalk, under a canopy—and signals for the waiter to bring another bottle of beer. Kit says, “You look mighty pleased with yourself, Edgar. Something tells me you’re out at least twenty-four bucks.”

Edgar just ignores that and says, “So whadja think?” “I hope that’s not the business you brought me here to see.” Edgar smiles up a big mouthful of crooked yellow teeth. Kit feels

like smacking him with a chair. But then Edgar says just one word: “Gumballs.”

Kit’s taken aback. He almost spills beer on himself. *Gumballs*.

“I heard you try it out,” Edgar says in a sly tone, as if he were talking about one of the girls. “You couldn’t resist, could you.”

Kit thinks about it. He supposes he could have resisted just fine. He’s sure he will next time. It was twenty-five cents down the drain. A little entertainment, maybe, but once you’ve done it, well, as he wrote to Susan, “it’s time to move on.”

Bear in mind: Kit’s been around the block a few times. He’s parachuted behind enemy lines. He’s flown helicopters. He was in on Ysa’s mission into Burma. He climbed Mt. Blanc in bare feet. He did survival training in the Congo. He was in the Olympic try-outs for marksmanship. So if a gumball machine manages to get a quarter out of him just once, well it must be a pretty good machine. But it’s going to have to fly around the room backward to hold his interest for long.

Edgar isn’t holding his interest any better than a fancy gumball machine. Kit’s already getting bored with him and his constant pressure. He’s always saying, *Come on, have another drink*, or *You know what y’oughtta do, y’oughtta buy some land here*, or *Do you have any idea how many square meters of frog skins this country produces in a year?* It’s a lot of pressure when the temperature’s a hundred and three and the humidity’s almost as high and the city buses sound and smell like Russian tanks and everybody’s got their TVs turned up all the way and there’s nobody else to talk to but Edgar.

Edgar signals for the waiter to bring him a pack of Hollywoods. The waiters here have white jackets. Kit likes that a lot. It reminds him of the French colonies in Asia and Africa. So far it's the best thing about Brazil, besides the gumball machines. The waiter brings Edgar's cigarettes, waits until Edgar has one in his mouth, lights it for him. Kit likes that, too. Edgar hardly seems to notice. He squints through the smoke but doesn't say anything while some kind of impact's supposed to be sinking into Kit. All Kit's thinking is that he could make a fortune in this country if he started a brewery and made beer out of something other than swampwater and rice.

Finally Edgar leans in close and says something. Kit can't hear it because a bus is going by. He leans in a bit to hear it better. This time, just as Edgar says it, a kid on the sidewalk lets loose with two-fingered whistle and shouts something to somebody on the other side of the traffic. Kit just smiles as if he heard what Edgar said and leans back.

"You didn't hear me," Edgar says in a moment of relative lull. He looks hurt.

"Say what?" "I say *that was my gumball machine.*" Well that raises Kit's eyebrows a bit. His half-brother owns the

fanciest gumball machine in all of South America and he's got it installed in a roach motel. And by the look on his face, he's as proud as the father of twin boys.

Kit says, "That's quite an asset. *Hell* of a good location." He can already smell what's coming. He's glad it won't be tempting.

"That's just one," Edgar says. "I've already got ten of them deployed all over Belém."

"In whore houses?"

"Not all of them. One in a supermarket. One at the bus station. You probably saw the one at the airport..."

Kit tilts his head pensively. He searches his memory banks for the image of a six-foot gumball machine or even the distant whine of a siren. "fraid I missed it," he says.

"Yeah, the idiots who run the place put it over near the police kiosk. It's safe, but who's going to go near cops just for chewing gum?"

Edgar waits. It takes Kit a while to realize he meant it as a real question. He wanted an answer. Who goes near cops just for chewing gum?

"Oh, um, well...I don't know. Other cops, I guess."

"*Wrong!* The answer is *nobody*. It's a wasted asset. If you want to make money off a recreational flavored re-chewable snack dispenser, you need traffic. In the United States, it has to be kids. In Brazil, hell, everybody's a kid. These Wiz-Bang machines—that's

who makes them, Wiz-Bang, Ltd.—are like carnival waiting for a quarter. I average two hundred and seventy dollars a month per unit. Ten units is twenty-seven hundred per month. In a country like this, that's money. But now look: a hundred machines, twenty-seven *thousand*. Per *month*. You know what that adds up to in a year?"

Kit doesn't even bother trying to figure that out in his head. Edgar sits back with his cigarette, waiting for Kit's jaw to hit the sidewalk. But Kit's jaw remains locked. Finally, Edgar gives him the answer. "Three hundred and twenty-four thousand dollars. *Per annum.*"

Kit whistles with disbelief and says, "That's sure a lotta gumballs." He knows what's coming. Meanwhile, Ysa had two girls working on her nails at the same time. She was having them painted with rainbows on a background the color of watered-down Bordeaux.

Soong Tan was getting hers done the same way but quite against her will. She looked like she was getting her fingernails ripped out, not painted up. She came right out and expressed her opinion. "This is stupid," she said. "Even if they look like rainbows, it's unnatural. I bet it causes cancer."

"We'll just do it once," Ysa said. "For the experience. A little civilization to take with us into the jungle."

Elizama didn't hear any of this. She was under the hair drier. The few moments of solitude filled her head with things to say. As soon as she came out, she hit the ground running.

"Man in zis country, no good," she said. Her accent made her sound like a little girl. "I never marry wis Brazilian man. No way. Zey don't hispect you."

Ysa, feeling faint from the vapors of fingernail polish, said, "Is Edgar a good husband?"

"Oh, yes. He's good. He comes home at night. He talks to me. He always tell me his plans. He's soooo eentelligent."

Ysa hadn't detected much in the way of eentelligence in Edgar. As a matter of fact, she thought he was pretty dumb. And to her he seemed the worst kind of dummy, the kind who thinks he's smart.

Trouble was, he had irrefutable proof of his superior intelligence. He could beat just about anybody at just about any kind of board game or card game. He played Kit and Ysa in poker the same day they arrived and cleaned them of all their American coins. The next morning he whipped Kit's butt in chess. By afternoon Kit would play him in anything just because it gave him an excuse not to talk for a while. So Edgar beat him at Chinese checkers and then Crazy Eights and then backgammon. Kit knew his foster-brother was cheating just to see if he could do so undetected. He didn't care. At night they played a Brazilian card game something like gin rummy with a lot of extra rules. Pretty soon Ysa could tell Kit was just tossing in cards to get rid of them, handing Edgar vast combinations. Edgar beamed with joy as he clobbered everybody else by several thousand points. Smart dummy that he was, he couldn't see that no one else was even trying. Elizama didn't seem to notice much either. She never shut up.

Nor did she shut up at the beauty salon. Watching the work on Ysa's nails as if they might end up in a museum, she gave a detailed report on the errors and inadequacies of Maria, the maid. Maria had failed to clean behind a certain toilet where Edgar tended to leave a puddle. Maria bought wilted collards at the market. Maria always came back late after her day off. Maria neglected to fill the ice tray. Maria had fleas.

Ysa never knew what to say to Elizama. She tried to maintain a look of sincere concern, but when it came time to contribute to the conversation, she found her brain devoid of any possible offering. Once she managed to ask what Edgar did for a living. Elizama answered, “He has a booziness.”

“A booziness?” She had no idea how one could earn a living at that. “What kind of booziness does he have?”

“Oh, I don’t know. In Portuguese, we call it *negocios*.”

Then Ysa understood. *Negocios* meant *business*. It sounded like the Spanish. That was how she was learning Portuguese. Every time a word sounded like the French or the Spanish, both of which she knew from her days as an ambassador’s daughter, she learned it.

Once they got their bodies all tuned up, Eleizama took Ysa and

Soong Tan to the beach. Ysa thought she was gazing out over the Atlantic until she swam and discovered it was fresh water. That vast expanse of sea was the Amazon itself.

The sun burned down from directly overhead. Ysa kept slathering on the Number 15 sun screen, but she still felt herself burning. When she asked Elizama to pass the sunscreen, Elizama reached over to squirt a blob into the palm of her hand. But rather than squirt, she gasped. Her index finger, with its incredibly long rainbow-streaked nail, darted to Ysa’s palm and jabbed into a place just below the middle fingers. With eyes so wide her eyeballs almost fell out, she looked up at Ysa and said, “*Meu Deus!*”

At first she thought the pedicure girls must have done something to her hand, but then Elizama leaned in real-real close and poked the tip of her nail into a crack in Ysa’s palm.

“Are you seek?” Elizama asked.

Except for the effects of the sun and some lingering dizziness from the morning of nail polish fumes, Ysa felt fine. She said, “No, I’m not sick...not that I know of.”

“Is somebody in your family very hich?” “Very hich?” “*Hich*. Much of money. No?” Ysa shook her head. No rich people in her family. No family, in

fact. Her father was killed in Burma. Her mother died of cancer. No brothers, no sisters. She thought she had an uncle in Netherlands who worked in a bank, but she didn’t even know his name.

“Does it say I’m sick?” she asked, squinting into her palm.

“It says you *die*,” Elizama whispered, looking up with wide-eyed wonderment. “But hich. You die, but vehy, vehy hich when you go.”