
CHAPTER 4

Sweet Bacardis. Warm Beer.

Today, Mason's life would change forever. He just didn't know it yet.

He staggered through the maze of flesh. It smelled like coconuts.

His Saturday had arrived. It was ninety-two degrees and not quite noon. The humidity hung as a foggy curtain, blurring the shoreline north and south.

Coconut oil failed to mask the other smells, though -- the smell of sour sweat, warm beer and sweet Bacardis. It was an aromatic cocktail he'd grown to love and hate.

Inside his head, sounds were distant as in twilight sleep; conversations floated between hollow voices, remote and disconnected. They changed as abruptly as if he was switching channels on his black & white Philco portable television. Mason couldn't make out all the words but felt the vibration of their laughter resonating through his belly as he stumbled through deep sand. Laughter punctuated the voice-noise but there was no punch line. The laughter seemed to come from nowhere.

Mason shuffled around the oil-slathered bodies. White sand packed his Adidas with each step and his legs burned as he labored to move each foot forward. A half mile of beach was packed with sun worshippers on full display, their only concession to modesty was a thin string of jersey flossing dark tan ass cheeks.

"Thongs," Mason snickered. In his day, thongs were flip-flops with a plastic strap that slid between your big toe and the second.

"Thongs," he muttered. This time, he was not laughing. His face went flat and his nose smelled baking flesh. A cacophony of intelligible jabberings attacked his eardrums ... all because he remembered thongs. One word was enough. Mason's nightmare had returned.

As usual, the visions came first. In the swale beneath their encampment, the night air moved. Peering hard, he tried to distinguish people in the moving shadows but he

couldn't. The black pajamas of Charlie disappeared against the jungle's soggy monsoon night.

The sounds came next. He heard the high-pitched crackle of a Chinese-built AK 47. Infantrymen called it the "AK"; its bullets were designed to tumble and break apart on impact, inflicting maximum damage to flesh and bone. Now stumbling and zig-zagging around the Oval Beach sun worshippers, Mason's panic grew. He covered his ears to keep out the sounds.

"Gooks in the wire! Gooks in the wire!" Front-line infantry shouted over their shoulder in a futile plea for help as black-clad Charlie scrambled under the razor wire installed to protect the camp's perimeter. Front-line grunts knew the ease with which Viet Cong guerrillas could slip under fields of razor wire. It was as if there was no protection at all. The grunts knew their fate.

M-18 Claymor mines exploded in hopeless defense, sending shock waves and deadly frag out from the camp's perimeter toward the enemy. The grunts' attempts to thwart the attack was useless. The VC didn't care how many they lost; to them, lives were expendable. Besides, North Vietnamese regulars were not far behind.

"Incoming! Incoming!" The warning was married to the sound of a mortar round whistling through the air. Phosphorous flares illuminated the sheer terror etched on muddy faces of boys too young to be living through hell on earth.

Mason's nightmares always began like that. Triggered by nothing more than the smells of human flesh roasting on a tourist beach in summer, his terror would return. The sight of his soldier-brothers being overrun and their death cries as they were slaughtered possessed him.

Mason was sweating now, trying to move faster through the sand as the cinema rolled inside his brain.

He'd been in country just three weeks. Grunt Army, stationed in Dak To. Outfitted with a Colt M-16 and a belt of grenades left over from World War II. He stuck a pack of Camel no-filters in the netting covering his steel helmet next to a picture of Debby, his girl.

In early November, his unit was ordered west to protect Fire Support Base 12, then was immediately called back to Dak To amidst rumors the Viet Cong and North

Vietnamese Army planned to join forces. On the 12th of November, all hell broke loose. Three weeks in country, squatting over a trench latrine, he felt a hot sting in his backside. He thought a scorpion had stung him. He was wrong.

Mason figured taking a bullet in the ass would have sent him stateside. He was wrong again.

President Johnson had just ordered another 100,000 soldiers to Southeast Asia and he wasn't about to let anyone go home for a flesh wound. Doc Brown, the M.A.S.H. medic, patched him up and sent him back to his unit.

Six months of his required active service had passed; he had a year and a half to go. That is, if the war didn't last longer. Damned Army could keep them in country till the duration of the war if they wanted to.

The Tet Offensive changed everything.

Mason survived the Battle of Hue, one of the deadliest firefights in the Viet Nam war. He took grenade frag during a Charlie guerrilla attack. This time his injury would send him stateside for sure. He was almost right.

"Private First Class, Mason McDonald," he'd say, "38062988." He'd spent five years after the Battle of Hue saying that. Every day; sometimes two or three times a day. That's who he was. Private First Class for nearly five years, even though he was a draftee and should have been home in two. A resident of the Hanoi Hilton from January 31, 1968 till eight Army Rangers paid a visit to his POW camp in '72.

Years later, he bragged about living through hell, thinking it would make the sounds and sights and smells stop. It didn't.

On Oval Beach in 1998, words like Khe Sahn and Tet Offensive don't mean much, Mason knew. Most of the bodies on the beach today were born a decade later. They didn't remember. They didn't care. How could they?

Nam was a long, long time ago. Children born after the fall of Saigon were having babies now. They drove Beemers and carried portable telephones in canvas bags. They ordered an Oberon "tall" with a wedge of orange and thought nothing of spending 80 bucks on a pair of socks.

He could feel them looking at him. They always did, these sculpted bodies which smelled like mangos, bananas and coconuts. They looked at him and laughed. That

was why their laughter didn't follow a punch line, he realized. *He* was the punch line.

"Thongs," his thoughts bounced back. Now he remembered the connection. Thongs – the flip-flop kind – were Westernized from Asian culture. Americans discovered bright, plastic versions of this centuries-old foot ware at Walgreen's and S.S Kresge in the early '60's. "Plastics," Mason thought. "There's a great future in plastics!" mumbling the line from "The Graduate," his favorite Dustin Hoffman movie. Sometimes he got it mixed up with the other one, "Goodbye Columbus," and Richard Benjamin. He wasn't sure why that mattered.

"Mental pinball," he had told the doctors, "It's how my mind works now. It's like a shiny, steel ball ricocheting off one bumper and into another. I can't control it."

Just about anything could trigger the visions, the memories, the sounds -- even strings of orange Spandex disappearing into a beach bunny's ass crack.

Struggling through deep beach sand in his Adidas cross-trainers, cotton ankle socks, cutoff Levi's and Grateful Dead tank top, Mason's grey hair was rubber-banded into a pony tail down past his shoulders.

"Hey, check out the hippie." Mason heard. "Peace love dove, baby, wanna' toke?" He knew the question was always accompanied by some dude pinching his index finger to his thumb, holding it to his lips and sucking in a drag. "Puff and pass, dude. Puff and pass."

Mason knew the gesture now and thirty years ago. Knew it well. Ever since his first night in the Delta with the 4th Infantry Division. "Hey, FNG, take a hit of this." the Lieutenant Colonel stuck out the joint, wrapped tightly in stained Zig-Zag paper, "Keeps the edge off." Fucking New Guy, that's what he was then. The LC – Lieutenant Colonel – "Doc" Holliday, called everybody FNG till they'd been in-country at least six months; longer if they were stupid. FNG's were good at getting you killed, doing stupid shit.

Unlike Doc Brown, Doc Holliday wasn't a medic. He earned the nickname in a shootout reminiscent of the O.K. Corral by killing six VC in close combat with his two pearl-handled .45's after emptying two clips from his M-16.

Mason knew the gesture this morning before all the sun worshippers showed up. Before the visions came back. Wading in the shallows watching the sun come up over the dunes, sucking a doob and washing it down with a cup of Jamaican Blue Mountain.

A morning cup and a toke, on the end of the beach where the queers hung out. He liked the queers. They were nice to him. They didn't make fun of him; they treated him like he was okay. He called 'em queers and they seemed okay with him doing so. "Don't call us homos or faggots, though, we'll go bitch-assed postal on you."

So he just called them queers and they called him "Cap'n." He liked that. He was never a captain. He was drafted in '67, a grunt; he could never have made it past sergeant. He never made sergeant, either.

His Adidas were filled with sand as Mason worked to shuffle his feet toward the snack bar. Two kraut dogs, a box of popcorn and a 32 oz. Wild Cherry Pepsi later, his dullness started to wear off; his mental fog lifted. His mouth no longer felt like cotton and the sounds in his head were silent. The cold sweat had stopped and he was beginning to feel warm again. Even the hard bodies had stopped staring at him.

Except for one guy.

The guy kept looking at Mason like he wasn't. He was trying to, anyway.

He looked familiar. Had they met before? No, they hadn't met, he decided. Still, he looked like someone he knew. Mason couldn't remember much when the visions came. Everything got blurry.

This guy, Mason thought, this guy stuck out. About the same age as the sunbathers on the beach, he was in his late 20's, 30 tops. In good shape.

He was dressed as if he should be with the boaters, not the beachers. He wore Topsiders, a Nautica polo shirt and camp shorts. Mason noticed details most people don't. On his wrist was a Tag Heuer chronograph. He had no tats or piercing, at least where you could see them, and he had clean fingernails. His hair was neatly cut but strategically tousled like he was trying to be casual.

"CIA," Mason guessed, "or NSA." Mason thought for a moment then muttered, "Shit." He just wanted to be left alone.

Mason waited. He waited for his pulse to slow down, sipping the cherry cola down to the ice then chewing it. He waited till the guy checking him out knew *Mason knew* he was checking him out. He waited as the guy walked toward him.

“Mason McDonald?” Mr. Nautica Polo asked, “Private First Class Mason McDonald?”

“Who wants to know?” Mason replied.