

Chapter 1

San Diego, 1969

Adversity toughens manhood, and the characteristic of the good or the great man is not that he has been exempt from the evils of life, but that he has surmounted them.

—Patrick Henry

It felt funny, being outside without my cover. It had been four years since I felt the cool breeze run through my high and tight. *This is going to take a while*, I thought as I walked across the parade grounds of Balboa Hospital to the chow hall for my last breakfast of powdered eggs, SOS, and crappy coffee. There were some things I wouldn't miss about the navy. This episode of my life was coming to a close, and the bright day whispered promises of new opportunities waiting just beyond the gate.

Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay" on Armed Forces Radio seeped through the speakers as I shuffled along the chow line and headed for a seat. Johnny was sitting at one of the tables, massaging the stump that used to be his arm. His jet-black hair shone brightly under the mess hall lights. He looked up with a grin as I slid my tray onto the table.

"Hey, short-timer. How's it going?" he asked through a mouthful of lumpy Cream of Wheat. "Are you ready to enter the real world?"

I sipped my mug full of tepid java, wondering the same thing. "As ready as I'll ever be. It's going to be an adjustment, that's for sure." Looking into my cup, I saw that the oil slick on top of the coffee had an iridescent glow. "How's the arm?"

He grinned—Johnny always grinned—and gurgled, "Feels pretty good today, hardly any of that phantom pain. A few more weeks of therapy and I get my prosthesis. Then I'm outta here. Mom wrote and said that the whole town of Nowata is planning a big homecoming and they have a cashier's job lined up for me at the feed store. Then it's off to Stillwater in the fall on the GI Bill. Can you imagine this Okie redskin with all those cowboys? I can't wait to shake it up. How's that leg of yours? Can't hardly notice your limp."

I reached down and massaged the six-inch scar running diagonally across my thigh, smiling. "Getting better, but I won't be running any marathons for a while."

He reached across with his good arm and handed me a ring of keys.

My smile disappeared. "Are you sure you want to give her up? She's your pride and joy."

"You paid me top dollar, and besides, I can't quite handle a stick shift any more. There's a new GTO with automatic transmission calling my name. Besides, I owe you, Luke."

"You don't owe me shit, Marine," I growled. This was a conversation I didn't want to have.

But Johnny persisted. "Me and seven other guys sure as shit owe you, Corpsman. You dragged our asses out of that clusterfuck. You deserve a lot more than a '65 Mustang and that Silver Star. Those assholes should give you the Medal of Honor. Hell, they should give you the keys to the White House. Kick that sorry asshole out."

I cringed. "They need to give the medals to those guys who didn't make it. Better yet, get us the hell out of that Godforsaken country. It's not our fight, and our boys are just fodder for the generals' and politicians' egos."

As we were talking, a huge shadow fell over the table. Baby Huey slipped in beside Johnny and said, “Hey, Doc. Hey, Johnny. What are you two shitbirds up to?”

His real name was Howard, but due to his size—six feet, six inches tall in his stocking feet, with a girth of 225 pounds—and gentle disposition, the moniker was a natural. The burns along one side of his ebony face and neck took away from his otherwise natural good looks.

Johnny punched him in the arm. “Hey. Doc’s mustering out today. We were just talking about the state of the world and our place in it.” His lopsided smile returned. “Nixon announced that he’s pulling out twenty-five thousand troops. That’s a start!”

Huey let out his deep baritone laugh. “What about the other four hundred and fifty thousand? He’s just playing politics. As long as we’re over there, shit like My Lai is going to happen. And those hippy-skippy assholes sitting outside the base with those ridiculous signs can paint all of us with those atrocities. I’m not a pacifist, but that war is just wrong!”

“Well, I guess it ain’t our concern anymore. It’s someone else’s problem now.” I got up and shook Huey’s huge hand. “So long, big guy. Stop by if you’re ever up my way.”

He pulled me into a bear hug that nearly crushed my ribs. “I still can’t believe you carried me all the way to the LZ. Johnny’s right, they need to give you more than a crappy piece of metal for what you did. Stay safe, Doc.”

I just shook my head and retrieved my hand from his big mitt. “You would have done the same for me.” I grabbed Johnny’s shoulder. “Johnny, you better keep in touch, or I’ll hunt you down and rip off your other arm.”

“You too, Luke.” Johnny wasn’t grinning for a change. He hung his head, refusing to meet my eyes. “I’m gonna miss you.”

After emptying my tray, I left the mess hall and walked past two buildings, then entered the admin building.

“What are you going to do, now that you’re a free man?” Lieutenant Grogin asked as he handed me my discharge papers. “You know that reenlistment offer still stands. Ten big ones in your pocket and we’ll fly you to ’Nam to sign the papers so it’ll be tax free. The navy needs men like you. You could chart your own course if you chose to stay.”

“Thanks, sir, but my baby sister’s graduating with her bachelor’s degree next week, and I’m gonna be there. Then, I’m off to school on the GI Bill for my own college career. Who knows after that? The navy’s been pretty good to me, and I might consider reenlisting, but I want to get my degree and experience something else, maybe helping others with something other than a tourniquet and a morphine syringe.”

“Well, Captain Perdue has been summoned to the Pentagon, otherwise he’d be here to see you off. I’ve heard him on the horn discussing you. Best of luck, Sailor.”

I gave him a smile and walked out into the sunshine, heading for the barracks.

The hike down the street to the barracks took only a few minutes.

There, I picked up my seabag, then threw it into the trunk of the Mustang, climbed in and headed out. It was another cloudless San Diego day as I drove under the towering palms and eucalyptus trees and out through the gates of Balboa Naval Hospital. The glow of the sun trickled through the foliage, throwing nymphlike shadows that danced across the hood of the convertible.

Near the gate a small group of long-haired protestors clustered. They yelled, waved their signs at the car, and gave halfhearted peace signs. Some of the peace signs were with one finger. They seemed so young. I wondered at the difference between their world and mine, and if the wounds that this war had created could ever be healed. With a quick wave back, I shifted into third and drove down the hill.

Tuning the car radio to K-Earth 101, I navigated the narrow streets, jumped onto El Camino Real, and headed north. I could have taken the new interstate and saved a lot of time, but I was drawn to the old two-lane by something deep inside. There was no rush; Riley's graduation wasn't for another week. In the words of my old friend, Andy, I had nothing to do and all day to do it.

As I navigated the narrow streets of San Diego, the roadside signs alternated between US 1 and 101 without any logic, but the brass mission bells that hung on shepherds' hooks led the way. I cranked up the radio as The Kingsmen sang one of my favorites, "Louie, Louie." I couldn't figure out what they were singing, but I was pretty sure it was erotic.

Two hours later, the sweet smell of caramel corn invaded the open cockpit of the Mustang as I passed through Santa Monica and spied the giant Ferris wheel suspended in the mist over the ocean. A few miles later I cruised into Malibu and my stomach was making threatening noises. I spotted a hole-in-the-wall beachside café and pulled onto the gravel among the half-dozen or so vehicles. Soft music strummed through the outside loudspeakers, and the blackboard out front advertised a blackened mahimahi sandwich special that sounded good.

After finding a table and ordering, I sipped my iced tea and watched the surfers trying to find a wave. The water was churning, not much action though. Harbor seals poked their heads above the surf and taunted the interlopers. The sandwich was every bit as good as I had hoped. Tangy tartar sauce teased my tongue, and the tension in my shoulders and neck started to ease as I stared across the blue waters. Something about large bodies of water calmed my inner being.

The afternoon sun warmed my head and shoulders on the winding course up the Pacific Coast Highway. Coming over a hill and around a curve, I was surprised by a flash of light and smoke billowing from an area along the coast. A dark projectile climbed out of the smoke, headed out to sea, and banked left, running parallel to the coast while navy cruisers tried their best to shoot it down.

Must be the boys at Point Mugu playing war games, I thought. Just then, a dartlike projectile shot from one of the ships and the target missile burst into flames. "Nice shooting, sailor!"

The Mustang's motor purred, and the car dropped into the western edge of the Oxnard Plain. The memories began to crystallize, and my mind drifted back to that summer.

And what a summer! The summer of the great adventure...

Chapter 2

Trouble in Paradise, 1957

There is nothing permanent except change.

—Heraclitus

Oh boy! Twelve years old, and school was out for the summer—it couldn't get much better than that. I'd just finished my paper route and didn't have a care in the world. The sun was shining, and as I pedaled my bike through the treelined avenues of Redfield, I was going through all my vacation plans. The Boy Scout jamboree was coming up in three weeks, and I still had a few activities left before I earned my next merit badge for First Aid. Maybe Riles would let me practice putting a splint on her arm.

The air was heavy with the smell of citrus and cut grass as I rounded the corner of our street and almost ran into Mr. Dominguez's milk truck.

"Better watch where you're going, Luke. Not everyone keeps their eyes out for wild boys on bikes like I do," the ever-happy, rotund man said. Then he laughed. "Don't want to have to peel you off of my grill."

"Sorry, sir. I wasn't paying attention," I hollered as I slid to a halt in front of our house. "How's Cindy?"

Mr. Dominguez had already rounded the corner, so I didn't get an answer. Cindy was Mr. Dominguez's daughter. She was a year ahead of me in school and beginning to fill out in all the right places. I had a huge crush on her, along with every boy in my class. Much to my consternation, my feelings went unnoticed. The lovely lass didn't know what she was missing.

Walking into the house, I could hear music coming from the television in the living room. Bill Haley and the Comets were rocking around the clock on *American Bandstand* while my little sister, Riley, sat glued in front of the set. The cast of kids in the studio were swaying to the rhythmic beat of the song.

"You're gonna get cancer sitting that close to the TV, Riles. You're being bombarded with radiation," I said on my way to the kitchen.

She stuck her tongue out at me. "That's an old wives' tale. Mr. Tucker said so in our science class. He said that the radiation from television cathode-ray tubes is insufficient to cause any harm." She looked back at the TV. "Bring me a glass of juice when you come back, please."

Riley was nine years old and already the genius of the family. While I was a good student, she took school way too seriously and never failed to get straight As. I didn't even try to argue matters of science with her. She knew things I didn't even know that I didn't know. Tall for her age, and lanky, she had blue eyes and curly black hair cut in a pixie, as well as freckles covering her nose. She looked like our mother must have looked at her age.

I, on the other hand, was just plain average. Average height, average weight, and straight brown hair that I inherited from our dad. Just an average guy.

Riley and I were three years apart, but we were best friends. Both of us were somewhat bookish and shy, so we didn't have other close friends. Our life was simple. Dad was a hardworking man who earned enough for us to be in that mythical American middle class, even if we were on the lowest rung. He had served in the army in Europe. He never spoke of the war, but I had once

stumbled upon an old shoe box in the garage that held artifacts from his service, including a Purple Heart with a bronze oak leaf cluster. I think that meant he had been wounded twice.

Mom and Dad had been childhood sweethearts and married as soon as Dad received his discharge in 1945. They'd built a loving home for us here in the valley. Then, Mom died suddenly when I was eight and Riley was five. Her death had driven the three of us closer to each other.

I could sense trouble as soon as I walked into the kitchen. Dad was home in the middle of the day and having a quiet conversation with my mom's half-sister, Aunt Helen, at the table. They didn't seem to notice my presence, so I grabbed a couple of glasses and poured some juice into each. As I slipped back into the living room, I heard Dad say, "It will only be for a short while."

Back in the living room, the undulating rhythm of Chuck Berry's "Maybelline" thrummed from the television while Riley tried in vain to match the gyrations of the pretty teens on the tube.

I put one of the glasses on the coffee table for her. "Keep it up, Riles. Your invitation from Dick Clark is in the mail," I quipped while walking back to my room.

She ignored me while desperately jerking her hips about a half-second behind the beat.

I closed my door to the noise from the TV, put the juice down, sat on my bed, and pulled my knapsack from underneath. This pack had been my dad's while he fought across Europe. It contained all of my earthly treasures and epitomized my adherence to the Boy Scout motto to Be Prepared.

I wasn't sure what it was that I needed to be prepared for, so the contents were a jumbled assortment of unrelated items that my imagination had invented uses for, including an old tarp, a ball of string, and two sticks of beef jerky. The remaining treasure included Dad's old mess kit, a dented canteen full of water, my lucky rock that I was sure was flint in case I needed to start a fire, and of course my prize possession—my official Boy Scout knife. Wrapped in genuine simulated bone, this knife was the ultimate survival tool. Besides two blades, it included a corkscrew, a can opener/screwdriver, tiny scissors, and an awl that had a sawblade on one side. I couldn't wait to try it out at the jamboree.

I took care to inventory the pack's contents as I placed each item in its proper place. I was looking forward to camping.

Later that evening, I was watching the news on television, and Riley was in her room reading. I wasn't really into the news, but all three stations broadcast at the same hour each day. Dad came in and sat on the couch next to me.

It had been four years since Mom had died, and I could still see the pain etched into his face. Riley and I missed her like crazy, but I could tell that our pain was nothing in comparison to the emptiness and loneliness that my dad felt. His pain never got in the way of the love and affection that he shared with us, though. It was like he was filling in for Mom as well as being a great father. In my mind, he was doing an amazing job.

The anchorman was talking about some place called Vietnam and said an American had been killed there. I asked Dad where Vietnam was.

Dad frowned and sighed, "It's in Southeast Asia. Our boys don't need to be involved in that place. Eisenhower needs to keep us out of other peoples' troubles. He knows better."

"How come you were home in the middle of the day? What was Aunt Helen doing here? I thought she went to Hollywood to become a star."

"She came back to town a while back. I asked her to come over as a favor, and I need to talk to you about that." His shoulders slumped a little before he went on. "They let me go at the shop two weeks ago. Business is really slow, and they had to let all of the mechanics go except Fred. And they only kept him on because he's the owner's brother-in-law. I've been looking for work

all around, but there's not anything available. The government is calling it a mild recession, but it doesn't feel that mild to me. Anyway, I've got to find work and there's none around here, so I asked Helen to take care of you and your sister while I look. We don't have enough money for next month's rent and expenses."

A knot formed in my stomach, and I jumped up stuttering, "Where are you going? Why can't we just go with you? Aunt Helen is nice but kind of scary. Remember that one time she accidentally left me and Riley at the baseball game because she went off with that popcorn man for a drink? You always said that she was too wild and unreliable."

"I know, but she's your mother's half-sister and our only relative. She's agreed to take care of you while I'm looking for work. I've heard that there's plenty of work up north. I can't take you with me because I'll be on the road and won't have time to look after you and your sister. You guys can stay at Helen's apartment. It'll only be for a short time, and then we'll settle wherever I find a job. I need you to look after Riley while I'm gone. Can you do that for me?"

His shoulders folded in and his hands were shaking. I could see tears forming in his eyes and there was no way that I was going to add to his angst, so I nodded and gave him a hug while I brushed a tear from the corner of my eye. "I won't let anything happen to Riles. I'll take care of her."

Boy, I sure didn't know what I was getting into!

The conversation with Riley didn't quite go as smoothly. She pitched a complete hissy fit and hid in her room. Dad spent a lot of time talking to her, his voice too quiet for me to hear. I could hear her crying softly after bedtime, though. I don't think any of us slept well that night.

The next morning was overcast and dreary, just like our moods. We packed our clothes, and Dad drove us in our old Chevy to Aunt Helen's apartment on the other side of town. On the way, we passed a group of hobos gathered outside the Salvation Army Mission. I thought I was being clever when I pointed at them and mimicked some of the older kids. "Look at those scroungy bums. They're pretty useless. Why don't they get a job?"

Dad's jaw was set as he pulled the car to the curb. "Come with me." I was a little nervous in the midst of these strange men, so I hung back as we walked over to the group. Dad said hello and shook one of their hands. "Don, I want you to meet my son Lucas. Luke, Don served with me in Europe. He was one hell of a marksman. He picked off a machine gunner who had us pinned down from three hundred yards. Saved us a lot of casualties."

Don looked down and mumbled something. My dad squeezed his arm, then handed him a five-dollar bill and a pack of cigarettes as he walked away.

Back in the car, Dad turned a stern face to me, "Those fellows that you call 'bums' are God's children just like you and me. Life has thrown them a curveball, that's all. Of course, there are some bad apples just like everywhere, but they deserve our respect and help. You never know when you might need the same."

"You see, while we were in Europe, we all experienced more horror than any person should ever have to endure. And that horror overwhelmed some of us. For Don, the tipping point was when he saw the atrocities committed by the Nazis at Buchenwald. What we found there made us all sick."

We continued across town to an area of rundown buildings with weeds for lawns. All of the businesses had bars across their windows. It seemed like every other shop was a liquor store or a pawnshop. We pulled up in front of a dilapidated two-story apartment in desperate need of paint.

The building was practically falling apart, and the hallway smelled of cigarettes and liquor—and maybe urine. Aunt Helen welcomed us with hugely theatrical hugs. Her hair was a strange yellow color with black roots, and her eyes twitched nervously. She weaved as she led us to the spare bedroom.

“You’re going to have to share this room, and there’s only one bed. Luke, we’ll make up a bed on the floor for you, and you can pretend that you’re at one of those campout things that you love. I hope that’s okay?”

“No problem, Aunt Helen. I like sleeping on the floor. I guess I won’t be going to the jamboree, so I’ll just have my own right here. I can probably use a couple of blankets to make a tent. Don’t worry, I won’t have a campfire.”

She grimaced. I figured she didn’t know that I was kidding.

Dad brought our clothes up in two cardboard boxes, and Riley set about putting hers into the lone three-drawer dresser. I put my box and knapsack in the corner of the closet and went about folding a blanket that would serve as my mattress.

When I got to the kitchen, Dad was handing Helen a handful of cash. “This should keep you afloat for a while. I’ll send more if I get any work along the way.”

Then he got down on one knee to be at my level and handed me two dollars, “Luke, take care of Riley and your aunt. I’ll write and let you know how things are going, and with any kind of luck, I’ll send for you soon.” He looked me in the eye. “In the meantime, you’re the man of the house.” My chest tightened, and I felt a strange weight on my heart. All I wanted at that moment was to live up to his expectations.

We walked out to the street, and Dad pulled me into a big hug. “I love you son. I’m going to miss you and your sister like crazy. Say your prayers every night and be sure to include me. Take care of Riley.” His shoulders slumped as he got into the car. He started it and waved as he pulled into the street.

As the old Chevy turned the corner, I wiped the tears off of my cheeks. I sat on the curb and pulled off my shoes, then folded the dollar bills and placed one in each. I didn’t know why, but I had a feeling that I would need that money for something other than candy and comic books.

I got up and was walking back when Helen came out the door of the apartment complex. Her smile was gone, and she lit a cigarette. “Now, let’s get a few things straight...”

Chapter 3

Across Town, 1957

Affliction comes to us, not to make us sad but sober, not to make us sorry but wise.

—H. G. Wells

It's amazing how a few miles can change your life. Living with Helen was not exactly enjoyable. Her rules included staying in our room unless it was time to eat. She didn't exactly exude maternal empathy. We could go outside, but the neighborhood was in bad shape, and groups of greasers not much older than me were always hanging out on the street corners.

Each corner had its own ethnicity: Hispanic, Black, White, you name it. It didn't seem to matter which group—they all hated me and anyone else who ventured into their territory. The few times that I ventured out, I was challenged by mean-looking guys who seemed to think that roughing up a smaller kid somehow made them tough. Maybe they were acting this way because they'd never had anyone to show them a better way to act.

Once, when I was walking to the store to get something for Riley and me to eat, a group of Mexican kids came up and started taunting me. I tried to ignore them, but they just got into my face and then began shoving me. The leader of this gang grabbed my hair and punched me in the stomach. He swore at me in what I assumed was Spanish, then called me a dumbass gringo. As I was bent over, they tripped me and began laughing as I fell to the ground. While I was on the ground, each of them came up and kicked me, again and again. Eventually, they tired of the "game" and moved on down the block.

I was a slow learner, but after getting knocked down and kicked by a group of Chicanos, I decided the streets were not for me or Riley.

It turned out that Helen had a boyfriend, or should I say boyfriends. She was pretty enough, but in a coarse, used-up sort of way, and her friends were just as coarse. These were nasty-looking men who didn't seem to have much in the way of employment since they were there at all hours, smoking and drinking beer.

To a man, they were mean-spirited souls. They would swat at me as I passed through the living room and laugh if I cried out. The looks they gave Riley made me uncomfortable, and I made her stay in the room whenever one of them was in the apartment. Cigarette smoke choked the air, and liquor bottles crowded the kitchen counters. If we'd been able to get out of that dismal place even for a short while, our sadness could have been alleviated. I would even have welcomed spending time at school over the boredom of staring at those four walls.

It sure was turning out to be a lousy summer vacation.

We were on our own for meals, forced to forage through a diminished supply of TV dinners and cans of soup. I tried to press the issue of nutrition with my aunt, but she would either cuss at me or throw a few dollars my way and tell me to buy something good, which meant avoiding the toughs while making my way to the store three blocks away.

We got a letter from Dad two weeks after he left. It was postmarked Portland, Oregon. He told us how much he missed us, saying that the trip north was uneventful, and while he'd found some part-time work, there weren't any permanent, full-time positions to be had. He was headed for Seattle, where rumor had it that jobs were plentiful at an aircraft company. He asked us to say our prayers for him and said that he would send for us as soon as he could. His note indicated that he'd

included some money for us and Helen, but the envelope had already been opened, the funds appropriated by either Helen or her latest man.

One night, a few days after the letter, a man came to the apartment and started yelling at Helen. He said he wanted the money that she owed “them.” It evolved into a terrible fight. Riley and I cowered in our room while the two of them screamed and cussed at each other. It got physical and we could hear furniture being tipped over and dishes breaking. The sound of a slap echoed through the apartment and Helen began wailing. I wasn’t sure what to do when I heard Helen cry out that she would get them the money as soon as she scored. The door to the apartment slammed shut, and there was only the sound of Helen’s whimpering coming through the thin walls.

The next morning, Helen came into our room and told us to pack our stuff because we were moving. She looked nervous, and her face and arms were covered with bruises. When I started to ask where we were going, she interrupted and told me to shut up and pack.

After we had finished, we piled into her old DeSoto and headed out of town. How the heck was Dad going to find us now?