

Chapter 1

The alarm clock rang in Mason Burke's ear like a shotgun blast. A single thought flashed across his mind: *Would the five iron be enough to silence it?* Reacting with blind instinct, he grabbed the golf club propped next to his bed and used it to slap the offensive clock from atop his chest of drawers into the gaping maw of his closet. He flung the club across the room and rolled over, drawing himself up in a cocoon of sheets and comforters.

Something was wrapped around his toes as he wiggled and squirmed to find a more comfortable position. He pulled a pillow from the other side of the bed and tucked it underneath his head as a faint whiff of perfume caught his attention. His thumping, draft-beer-induced hangover was making it difficult to connect the dots in his brain. He rolled over, placing his face squarely into the pillow. As he breathed in the scent of sweat, perfume, and cigarettes, a name flowed into his brain. *Monique*.

He vaguely remembered having run into her the night before at his favorite bar, the North End Zone. He had tied on a momentous drunk after the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts informed him that he would, indeed, graduate college after a prolonged six-year stay in his undergraduate. His elation was short-lived after making, and losing, a ridiculous bet over whether or not ladybugs had balls. The next thing Mason knew he was upholding his end of the bargain by pissing in Brett Favre's old college football helmet displayed prominently behind the bar.

Monique, always one to time an entrance perfectly, had shown up just long enough to snatch him from the bar and throw him into a cab. The cabby was still counting Monique's money when she flung the door open the second time. "2102 Julian Place, and you *might* want to get moving," she said coolly, as she slammed the door on an angry mob pouring out of the bar behind them.

Mason ran his fingers through his long, red hair and put his hands behind his head. His thoughts drifted over the long standing crush he carried for Monique Avera. Their feelings for each other were quite genuine. That had never been the problem. He stared at the ceiling wondering just how fate always managed to place them together at the most inopportune moment possible. *What the hell is that around my foot?*

Mason pulled his right foot up to his hands and unraveled the soft material from around his ankle. He closed his eyes hard, then opened them again just enough to focus as he removed the item from underneath the covers. He chuckled as he watched Monique's bright yellow G-string panties fall away from his hand and land neatly on the pile of clothes beside his bed.

Mason slipped on his favorite pair of loose athletic shorts, opened his bedroom door, and lumbered slowly down the short hallway to the kitchen. He was still shaking off a touch of dizziness when a black, spectral form passed across his peripheral vision. He flung his right arm in a wild, violent motion and fell backwards onto the kitchen floor. A slight twinge of embarrassment tickled him as he stood up and picked his graduation robes up from the floor. He rubbed his lower back with his left hand as he hung the robes at the top of the entranceway. Mason was dusting them off when his hand brushed over a

bright, yellow sticky note attached to the fabric. He plucked it from the gown and held it to his face: *Try not to trip. Love, Monique.* He stared at the note for a moment and then at the ironed robes and muttered, “Mason Burke...you are a stupid, stupid, man.”

Mason stowed his robes behind his bedroom door and walked into the living room. He turned on the stereo and collapsed into his green papasan chair for his first cigarette of the day. It was still early morning as he looked on the gray haze hanging heavy outside his tattered curtains. He reached over and closed them thinking that it looked much colder than what he knew to be a very muggy Mississippi morning. Mason leaned his head back as he exhaled a large plume of smoke. He watched it swirl above his head for a moment before it dissipated. The sounds of Miles Davis’ *Kind Of Blue* seemed to move in time with the smoke as he blew another small puff into the air.

As the music seeped from his stereo, he became acutely aware of how many of his personal items were intrinsically linked to these last six years of his life. For the first time in a long time, Mason felt lost and very empty. Pictures of his old band-mates were scattered all around the room; pictures taken over the past four years criss-crossing the country together. One favorite momento from his travels hung in a place of honor above the stereo. Mason chuckled as he remembered purchasing the bull skull with a bullet hole in its forehead for ten pesos during a hellish vacation to Mexico. His friend, David O’Connor, had used it to smuggle several illegal drugs through the border checkpoint. That success, as well as the bullet hole, had earned the skull its nickname: “Lucky”.

In the corner, though, was Mason Burke’s most prized possession, his father’s 1948 Martin D-28 acoustic guitar. His father, Garrett Burke, had used the instrument on

the road as a younger man, and it had stayed by his side all the way into adulthood when he and his wife, Molly, opened their own recording studio in Nashville. Garrett had loaned the instrument to his brother and was going to pick it up when he and his wife were gunned down outside of their favorite Italian restaurant. Their murder turned early 1980's Nashville upside down. The Burke's recording studio, GMB Recording, had helped record and produce a string of successful artists throughout the 1970's and was poised on the brink of true financial success when it all ended in a heartbeat on the sidewalk of 21st Avenue.

Mason stared at the guitar wondering, as he often did, about all the places the old girl had seen and the stories still resonating in those old pieces of wood. Her ambered-top was covered with enough dings and scratches to give a collector a stroke, but he felt it was the wounds that gave her character. They defined her existence as one that had been well-lived. She wore them as a badge of honor and Mason displayed them as such. He could never fathom storing her away in some climate-controlled vault.

He could not remember his father ever being more than a few feet away from the guitar at any given moment. It had been valuable, even in those days, but Garrett had kept it out on a stand like any other instrument in his collection. To him, the old guitar was merely a tool which allowed its player the best possible means for expression, like a fine pistol in the hands of an expert sharp-shooter.

Mason had very few memories of his father, but he could remember the tremendous amount of joy in Garrett Burke's face as he watched his son begin to learn the

instrument. Mason with his tiny learner instrument, and his father with his beat-up Martin guitar in his lap sharing a peaceful moment, just the two of them.

He walked over and took the guitar from its stand and sat back down in his chair with the instrument in his lap. Mason didn't play it; he just wanted it near. He leaned back, his arms draped around the body of the guitar as he realized how much faster time seemed to be moving. A small picture frame sitting atop one of his stereo speakers caught his attention. He stared for a moment at the picture of himself and his friend, Vince Davis, laughing in front of the New Orleans House of Blues where their group, Olfactory Hue, had performed the previous October. He had been outraged when Vince had told him back in February that he was leaving the group to join the Air Force. It had made no sense, whatsoever, to Mason. He had just assumed that when, or if, he graduated college, they would just stay on the road and things would go on as always. But, Vince had apparently had enough and made his opinion perfectly clear after their last show in Birmingham. As they were leaving the stage, Vince threw his guitar at Mason, and shouted to the band, "You can all eat shit!" He called a cab, bought a plane ticket, and flew directly to boot camp.

Since the dissolution of his group, Mason had thrown himself into the only thing he had on his plate, which was finishing college. He didn't even know why it seemed to matter. It never had before. But, he knew that if he didn't do *something* he would wind up working through his problems either in care of, or in service to, the state. Never having been one for long-term planning, it really hadn't dawned on Mason until the previous evening that he might actually *succeed* in graduating. And now, on the threshold of

success, he could find little joy attached to it. There was only a hollow sense of accomplishment accompanied by a crushing sense of dread.

He was on the verge of attempting to drown in his own self-pity when the phone on the table next to him rang. He answered it quickly to snuff out its awful noise.

“Hello,” he said groggily, as he wiped a bit of crust from his right eye.

“Hi, Mason. It’s Monique. I think we need to talk.”

Without a second thought, Mason hung up the phone. His day was already teetering on the edge of becoming abysmal, and he knew that, without a doubt, whatever Monique had to say would only serve to push it right over into intolerable. The phone rang again; its tone seemed angrier and more insistent. He shut it off with a flick of his thumb and leaned back in his chair. He was lighting another cigarette when he heard wheels crunching gravel in his driveway. He shot straight up in his seat screaming, “Jesus Christ, she’s ambushed me!”

He flew to the door and fumbled with the lock. Securing the deadbolt firmly in its housing, he stood on his tiptoes and peaked cautiously through the bottom pane of glass just above his head. He was surprised to find on his porch not a tall, shapely, woman shaking with righteous anger, but a small, wrinkled, figure standing there with a pair of large glasses slipping from her nose and a sweet smile nestled just underneath.

“Mamaw?” he mumbled as he popped the lock and opened the door, taking a step back to allow her to enter the house. “What are you doing here?” Mason asked as he realized his cigarette was still dangling precariously from his lips. “I thought you said Aunt Harriet couldn’t drive you down from Jackson?”

“Harriet didn’t drive...I did. I see you’re still smoking,” the old woman replied as Mason snuffed it out in an overflowing ashtray. “Well, you’re a grown man now, and you can do what you want, but let me tell you something, son, if you’re gonna smoke, at least buy some air freshener. It smells like charcoal and feet in here.” She sat her purse down on Mason’s couch and gave him a very warm hug.

“Sorry. It is pretty filthy around here,” Mason remarked as he pulled on his ragged Pittsburgh Steelers jersey which had been draped over the back of his chair. “Finals week was a killer. I’ll bet I’ve slept ten hours in the past four days and most of that was this morning.”

“Well, let me look at you, boy,” Mason’s grandmother said as she pushed her glasses back up to the top of her hawk-like nose. “Oh, your parents would have been so proud, Mason. You know your father took his time getting through college too, and I would say he did all right for himself.”

“Yeah,” Mason answered as he looked down at his feet, purposefully avoiding eye contact with his grandmother. “How about some coffee?”

“I’d love a cup.”

“No cream, no sugar?” Mason asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Sounds perfect, but, I think you’d better make it to go or you’re gonna be chasing your diploma across the parking lot.”

* * *

“Jesus,” Mason groaned as he stepped out of the drivers’ side of his maroon Toyota Camry into the oppressive summer heat of Mississippi. “Why do they have to

make these damn robes black?” His grandmother was ambling slowly to his side as he tried to adjust the fit of his graduation cap. The old woman reached up and carefully straightened the tassel then stepped back to admire her grandson, the boy she had raised since his seventh birthday.

“Mason, quit fidgeting so I can get a picture,” she chuckled as she fumbled through her purse for her disposable camera.

Mason was still uncomfortably adjusting the way the gown hung from his broad shoulders when his cell phone went off underneath his gown. “Sorry, Mamaw, hang on for one more second,” he said as he lifted up the right side of the gown and retrieved his cell phone from his pants pocket. He smiled at the familiar number illuminated on the screen.

“David! ‘Bout time, man,” Mason remarked. “I thought you might have forgotten. Where are you?” he scanned left to right in search of his friend when a finger tapped him on the right shoulder.

Mason turned around to see his oldest friend, David O’Connor, standing before him looking as well-dressed, and as blatantly uncomfortable, as he had ever seen him. To his knowledge, Mason couldn’t ever remember David tucking in a shirt, and with a quick glance at what looked like two sacks of oranges billowing out of a pair of trousers, he understood why. David’s frizzy, black hair was flying above his head as a trickle of sweat rolled down his wide forehead into the wooly mutton chops growing over his cheeks. He had grown up in the South but had never acclimated to the heat. He broke into sweats at the mere mention of the word “Summer”. He had threatened to move to Colorado for as

long as Mason could remember but, to date, the only move David had made was in the opposite direction to Gulf Shores, Alabama. David extended his large sweaty hand to Mason's and shook it vigorously before pulling him into a sweaty bear hug.

"Man, did you fall into pool on the way over here?" Mason asked sarcastically as he backed away from David and wiped his hands on the front of his graduation robes.

"It is *Africa* hot out here!" he shouted. "You better be glad I came up here at all! You know how much I hate Mississippi," David remarked as he stepped back to see Mason in his full cap and gown. "Geez, man, look at you. How could this fine establishment have ever let *you* slip through the cracks?" he laughed for a moment before he cringed at a hard pinch on his left arm.

"You behave yourself, David O'Connor," a creaky voice exclaimed from just below David's shoulder.

"Hi, Mamaw. Good to see you," David said as he gently hugged the old woman. "I thought Mason said you weren't coming? Didn't they pull your license?"

"The law is one thing; family is another," she remarked as she patted Mason on the back, motioning him toward the entrance of Reid-Green Coliseum.

"That's my girl," David smiled as they reached the double doors of the coliseum.

"Well, next time I see you guys I'll be carrying the most expensive piece of paper I've ever purchased," Mason said as he leaned down to hug his grandmother once more before going into the Coliseum.

“Yes, and when you’ve finished with all that *important* stuff, we have business to discuss,” David said as he flicked Mason’s tassel out of position and swatted the door closed between them.

Sitting through a college graduation ceremony is about as much fun as watching slugs mate, and moves at about the same rate of speed. To break the monotony of the endless parade of graduates, Mason brought along a copy of *Rolling Stone* which he read, cover to cover, more than once that afternoon. David couldn’t resist borrowing Mamaw’s camera to snap a picture of Mason with his nose buried in the magazine; a picture on the American educational system that he assured her would win him the Pulitzer Prize.

Finally, the roll call came to Mason’s section and he placed his now well-read copy of *Rolling Stone* in the chair and stood up to begin the long march to the stage. Conversations were taking place all around him having to do with graduate school or the prospect of some fantastic new job. His spirit wilted as he walked slowly towards the end of his college career. The full bore of potential “Adulthood” pressed down on him like a ton of bricks placed tenuously on his shoulders. With each step towards the podium, he could almost feel his feet sinking in a thick ooze; every step slowed to a mere crawl. Lost in his self-pity, Mason looked up to find himself face-to-face with the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, who fought a lop-sided grin as Mason approached.

“Mr. Burke,” he chuckled, “I’ve been waiting for this longer than you have, I suspect. Go forth, and if you ever give thought to graduate school,” he paused for a quick wink, “I know some excellent programs...in Guam.”

For a second, Mason forgot about the weight pushing down on him and caught himself laughing as the Dean shook his hand, handed him a black folder, and sent him on his way. He walked forward staring at his diploma, still in a state of shock when he heard somebody to his immediate right mutter, “Well, good luck to ya’.”

Mason was almost to the far side of the stage before he realized that he had completely snubbed the President of the University.

Knowing that he couldn’t sit quietly through the rest of the ceremony, Mason passed by his row and walked straight into the grandstand. As he worked his way through the crowd, he saw his grandmother and David stand up to meet him. He walked over to them, smiling, as he accepted another hug from his grandmother. She placed her hands on his shoulders, looked at her grandson with the proud eyes of a mother, and choked out, “Mason, I’m so proud of you right now, I don’t know what to do.”

“I know what you can do,” Mason responded as he put his arm around her, “You can get me out of here.”

“Well, honey,” said the old woman as they arrived in the parking lot, “I’ve got to get back to Jackson. I don’t like to drive back after dark these days because of my eyes. I’m sure the other drivers out there would appreciate me being off the road, too. I want you to take a few weeks off and relax. When you wind down, you’ll be able to see your path,” she reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope. “I think this will help.”

Mason opened the envelope which contained a card with a bulldog lying on the ground enraptured by a bone in its mouth. He opened the card and read the caption which

said; “A little something to chew on.” Just to the left of the inscription was a small green piece of paper with the words, “Mason Burke” and “two thousand dollars” written on it.

“Mamaw, this is too much. I can’t accept this,” Mason protested, as she gently closed his hands around the check.

“Son,” Mamaw replied, “you *will* take the money. It’s my gift to you and that’s final.”

Mason paused for a moment looking down at the check still in his right hand.

“Thank you, mamaw...for everything.”

She smiled and said, “You don’t have to thank me, son. The pleasure was mine.”

She kissed him on the cheek and stepped back, “Boys, I’ll tell you one time before I leave; go have a good time. But, for God’s sake, Mason...try not to let David talk you into doing something that’s gonna get you into trouble.”

“Hey,” David feigned offense, “that’s not even fair.”

Mason’s grandmother gave him a curiously raised eyebrow, but offered no other response as she turned and walked slowly to her car.

David looked at Mason with grin. “Some things never change. She always could tell when we were up to no good.” Mason watched her go as he unzipped his robe.

“So, what’s this *business* we’ve got?” Mason asked as he opened his car door, threw his graduation robes in the backseat, and loosened the tie from around his neck.

“*That*...we’ll get to later. Right now, you need to go to your place, pack some clothes, and meet me at my place in Gulf Shores in three hours.”

“You know...I’m *supposed* to be at work tomorrow,” Mason said as he calmly lit a smoke.

“I thought you hated delivering pizza?”

“True,” Mason answered as he leaned against the side of his car. “So, does this new business you’re talking about pay anything?”

“You ask too many questions, my friend. Just dig out your cell phone, quit that piece of shit job, and I’ll see you on the beach,” David grinned as he climbed onto his ragged BMW motorcycle. “I’ll be expecting you in three hours. If I’ve stepped out for a minute, the key is underneath the gnome at the front door.”

“Perfect. Nobody would think to look underneath the little fairy,” Mason chuckled as he unlocked the door of his car.

“It’s a gnome, you prick!” yelled David as he kick-started his motorcycle and drove away, leaving Mason with a phone call to make and many miles to drive.

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The last rays of the evening sun were bathing the western side of David’s house in a soothing shade of purple as Mason arrived in Gulf Shores, Alabama. He grabbed his duffel bag from the backseat and walked up a flight of rickety, wooden, stairs onto David’s porch. He looked down to his left and was momentarily startled by an ugly gnome staring up at him from next to the doormat. He knocked on David’s door, more out of habit than courtesy, and let himself in to find David in the kitchen mixing some drinks.

“What’s the poison?” Mason asked.

David's head jerked up in surprise as he thrust a plastic cup full of liquor in to Mason's hand. "Rum, of course! First night at the beach is always Captain Morgan's and Sprite. You know that, man!"

"But, you and I have an errand to run before we get too carried away," David said as he reached into a drawer in his kitchen and lifted out a small wooden box. "Drop your bag, slam that drink, and follow me," he said as he tossed Mason a long cigar.

"You still got your lucky Steelers helmet in your trunk?" David asked as he slipped out the front door with Mason struggling to keep up without spilling his drink.

"Wouldn't be very lucky if I didn't."

"Well, snag it and hop onto the back of the bike. We're goin' for a ride."

The evening air whisked over the motorcycle as David and Mason barreled down Perdido Beach Boulevard, the main drag through Gulf Shores which led across Perdido Pass and on into Florida. There was almost no one on the island as they cruised down the strip, but Mason knew that it wouldn't stay that way for long. Before the end of the month, tourists would be crawling over the island like ants over fresh road-kill.

Mason could see the lights of the Perdido Pass Bridge just ahead as they pulled off the highway and into a dirt parking lot paved with crumbled sea-shells. The parking lot was empty and dark. The sign on the building in front of them was turned off, but Mason could still make out the writing over the top of the entranceway: "Green's Steakhouse."

“Little late for a big dinner, huh?” remarked Mason as he climbed off the back of the bike. He took off his helmet and hung it on a handlebar before reaching into his shorts pocket for a cigarette. He was about to light one when David stopped him.

“No, man, break out the cigars because this is the surprise!” David exclaimed as he threw his arms up in the air and pointed behind him with his index fingers.

“Call me crazy, bubba,” Mason paused, “but, I don’t get it.”

“It’s not the restaurant, it’s what’s attached to it,” David said as he pointed to a wooden sign off to the right side of the building that read “Island Sands Condominiums.” The sign sat next to a one-lane driveway which ran from the parking lot, over a small hill, and behind the darkened restaurant where three separate buildings were all linked in a row by one continuous balcony.

“Here’s the skinny,” David explained as he withdrew his cigar and lit it while he walked Mason towards the side of the restaurant. “My buddy, Mark Smith, owns a bunch of these condos and I clean carpets part-time for him to make some extra bucks. So, Mark told me last week that he was kicking out some of his tenants and that he really needed to rent this place out to somebody besides these filthy Mexican laborers. He told me that if I could find someone in the next week, then he would skip the deposit and cut the rent down to a buddy price of five hundred bucks a month.” He handed Mason his lighter. “Happy graduation!” David grinned as he puffed a cloud of smoke from his cigar.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” Mason shook his head and laughed. “Man, this is great, but I’ve still got a house in Hattiesburg, I’ve got no job... what the hell am I gonna do to pay for this joint?”

“For five hundred bucks a month you could donate fucking plasma!” David replied as he moved to Mason’s side, placed his hand on his shoulder, and pointed to the condos.

“Sonny boy, Brother Dave is here to set you right. Tomorrow morning you’re driving back to Hattiesburg, you’re breaking your lease, we’re getting a truck, and by the end of the weekend you’ll be Alabama bound! They’ll never know what hit ‘em,” David grinned enthusiastically with his cigar clamped firmly between his front teeth. “So, suck it up! You’re a Hurricane Baby now!”

“Well, that’s all well and good,” Mason stalled, “but I still don’t have a job.”

“No sweat. You can cook with me out at The Roundback ‘til you land some gigs. I don’t know if you’ve checked out the entertainment around here lately, but it won’t take much to get all the work you can stand. By this time next month, shit, you’ll be the richest guitar player on this island!”

Mason placed the cigar in his mouth and stared ahead for a moment. He took a deep drag as he let David’s words roll around in his head. Then, as he thumped a touch of ash off he smiled, “Rich, you say...?”

“Oh, yeah, man,” David answered with a grin.

“Plenty of gigs?”

“Well, you’ll have to cook for a while, but it won’t take long.”

Mason walked back over to the bike, snatched his Steelers helmet from the handlebars, and placed it on his head. “Well, what are you waiting for, dammit? We’ve got a bottle of rum to drink and a truck to secure online!”

David walked over to the bike laughing and slapped the back side of Mason's helmet, "Took you long enough."