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**THIRTY FIVE****Jaws Too?!**

After three weeks of therapy, I regained almost complete use of my hand, although I still had very little feeling in the two outside fingers. With time even that would return to the point where I wouldn't notice it unless I actually thought about it.

One morning, at the beginning of the fourth week, I decided to have a go at swimming. I'd purchased a bathing suit at the PX, which was part of the hospital complex, and walked out onto the pure white sand where the lifeguards kept watch.

As far as I could see, the lifeguards had the nicest job of anyone in the country. They were Army personnel and I wondered just how one went about getting such a cushy position. Before going into the water, I wandered over to where they had a small shack set up right on the beach. A glance in at the open door showed that they had all the equipment lifeguards normally use, in addition to a small refrigerator stocked with food and cold drinks. They even had surfboards, for aiding in a potential rescue, which they often used for their own recreation.

There were quite a few people lying on the sand, getting a tan, including some very attractive nurses from the hospital, in extremely skimpy bikinis. Now this was the life!

I waded into the water, up to my waist and was struck by the clarity. I could see my feet standing on the bottom, as if I was in a chlorinated swimming pool, and the temperature of the water was pleasantly comfortable.

I was only standing there for a short time when, suddenly,...and I do mean *suddenly*, the water changed color. It turned from its clear aquamarine to a murky, almost black shade. I had absolutely no idea why the color would change like that. Although I'd lived along the shore of Long Island Sound all my life, I had never seen anything like this happen before. When I took a closer look, I found that I was standing in the middle of a massive school of small fish about the size of sardines. They were going by so fast that it was almost impossible to distinguish individual fish unless you were really concentrating. At first it didn't make sense, because I was only a short distance from shore and these fish were swimming past me, toward the beach!

It soon became clear what the fish knew that we people in the water didn't.

“Shark!...Shark!...Everybody out of the water!”

The call was coming over the lifeguard's bullhorns up and down the beach. In an instant, there was a mad dash as everyone, including myself, followed the small fish in toward land. Shortly after we were all safely up on the sand, a Huey came zipping along the shore and circled out where the shark was swimming. The door gunners opened fire with their M-60s machine-guns and made hamburger out of the deadly hunter.

Whenever sharks threatened the bathing area, which in this part of the world was fairly often, the lifeguards radioed over to the air base where a Huey was dispatched. They used these opportunities to practice shortening their response time in case of an enemy attack.

As soon as the Huey was gone, everyone went back into the water and I spent the rest of the day either swimming, or sitting on the beach staring at those gorgeous nurses, along with all the other males. Of course, the nurses knew it and were eating it up.

Later on, when I had a chance to speak with one of the medics back in my building, I asked how one went about getting a lifeguard position.

“Ahhh, yes,...the lifeguards,” he said with a pretty good imitation of W. C. Fields and obvious envy in his voice.

“Unfortunately, the only way to get that job is through the early out program.”

“The early out program? What’s that?”

He chuckled, “You won’t think the job is so good when I tell you. You see, the Army has a program where you can get out of the service six months before you normally would.”

I hadn’t heard of that one, “You’re kidding! You mean you only serve a year and a half instead of the full two?!”

“Sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“It sure as hell does!”

“There’s just one catch, my friend,...and that’s that you have to spend those last six months over here in the Nam. Of course, you get to pick the job you want for that extra six months, but coming back here after you’ve served your full year is not the easiest thing in the world.”

I thought about it for a moment. “Yeah, but, if you can pick the job, what’s wrong with being a lifeguard on the beach? It looks pretty damned nice to me.”

The medic nodded, “Sure it does,...to you and about a million other guys, and that’s the problem. It looks great to just about everyone over here. With all the guys signing up for the extension and putting in for lifeguard, how many do you think they need, even if you considered every beach in the country?”

Now I realized what he was getting at.

“Like just about everything else in the Army,” he continued, “there’s a waiting list, and until your name comes up, you’ve got to be doing something. They’ll give you an assignment as a temporary MP in one of the major cities, or a door gunner on a Huey, but then you’re back on the firing line again.”

“Yeah, I figured it sounded too good to be true.”

I thought about the job of being a door gunner as something I wouldn’t mind, considering how much I enjoyed riding in the Hueys, but I was also aware that a lot of them did get shot down. And being an MP in one of the major cities wasn’t the safest job in the world either.

Even with the negative aspects, I figured maybe I’d better wait to pass judgment on the program. I had only been in-country for about three months, counting my time in the hospital. Maybe, when I was further along in my tour, I’d feel differently about it.

The day finally arrived when I went in for my regular checkup and was pronounced fully recovered and fit for duty. As it turned out, I’d been pretty lucky. It was originally estimated that I might have something like a fifty-fifty chance of regaining the full use of my hand. Of course, that luck could be considered debatable because, now that I was completely healed, I had to return to the field.