

SHAPER



Stephen Brooke

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Shaper

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Chapter 1

“This shit the kids do now days, it ain’t surfing. It’s skateboard tricks on a wave!”

I nodded in general agreement to his attitude. “Kids always like tricks,” I responded. I thought of adding ‘silly rabbit’ to that but restrained myself. “It’s no different than the fancy nose riding when I was a kid.”

“Humph. I’m not as old as you, man. Power surfing was the thing when I started.”

“My preference too. Nat Young is still the template for me.”

“Yeah, Nat was the man.” Rick got up and walked over to my shaping stands, beer in hand. His taste in brew was generic. “So why are you shaping these shit boards?” Rick said ‘shit’ a great deal.

“It’s what they want. And they pay me.” I turned on the planer and donned my headphones. I usually shaped to classical music. It seemed to get me in the right mood for the job. “You probably shouldn’t come over here with an open can. You’ll get foam dust in your beer.”

It is likely that I spoke louder than I needed but how can you tell over the whine of a planer and with Berlioz in your ears? I started in cutting the rail bands, a clean swath from one end of the board to the other. Making a good cut is no big deal, a matter of practice and steady hands. Knowing where to cut is a whole other thing.

Rick said something and went back to his stool. I couldn’t make it out as I finished my pass with the planer. Skil 100 — the best, or at least it used to be. I’d never needed to replace it so I don’t know what may be considered better now.

I flipped the board over in the stands and ran the other rail. Rick

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was talking again so I powered down and pulled off the phones. "Looking good," he said.

I laughed. "I thought this was a 'shit board.' It does look okay, though," I agreed. "I'll finish it off tomorrow and get to the glassing."

"Why do you glass 'em yourself, Ted?" asked Rick. He tossed his empty Busch can toward the trash barrel. "Aren't there guys who could do that for you?"

"If anything gets messed up, I know who to blame." It was also more cost effective with my relatively small output. "There's a recycle bin for your cans." I pointed.

"Oh, sure." Rick scooped up the can and deposited it. "Ha, looks like no one else drinks beer in here," he said, peering into the bin. "Nothing but sodas."

"I don't drink when I shape," I said. "I need all my faculties. And it's mostly kids that come in and hang around. Grown men have better places to be," I chuckled, "but not you, I guess?"

"I'll tell you when I'm grown," Rick responded, matter-of-factly.

"I suppose that probably should apply to me too," I mused. "Just another Peter Pan avoiding that so-called real job."

"Aw, man, you're an artist. Don't let anyone ever give you any shit about that!"

"I give myself enough shit about it. Oh, well," I shrugged, "at least I do *something*." I looked over the shaping bay. "And right now I feel like doing something else."

"Had dinner? Kay wouldn't mind if you came over to our place."

"Y'know, I don't really eat meals. I've got in the habit of snacking all day."

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“That how you stay in shape at your age?” Rick patted his modest pot. “I used to have abs too, man.”

“If you knew how much my back aches right now, you wouldn’t envy me one bit.” Bending over with a heavy piece of power equipment does that.

“Oh. Well, come on over and have a beer anyway.”

“Okay. Let me hose myself off.”

There was a make-shift shower behind the house, partially screened with solar block. Not that anyone much would see me there and the folks in this neighborhood practically invented the ‘laid-back’ attitude, anyway. It was too late in the day for the water from the hose to be warmed by the sun. The cool spray rinsed away the foam dust and debris, into and through the haphazard canyons of the broken concrete floor.

I shivered as I toweled off and slipped into a clean — well, cleanish — tee-shirt and shorts. It was getting into Fall and evenings were growing cooler. I wouldn’t get away with dressing that way much longer, even in Florida.

Kay and Rick had a boutique-slash-gallery a couple doors down from my shop. It was Kay’s business, mostly; Rick was lucky just to have Kay. These places were old homes, along the coastal highway, long since turned to commercial use. Most were small, originally built as vacation cottages, now painted in improbable colors and housing artisans and used book stores and, among them, my *Cully Beach Surf Shop*. Many were also still homes to their owners.

Rick had waited for me. “Let me lock up,” I told him, going in the back door of the shop. The sales room seemed in order and, yes, the

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front door had been latched. A succession of teen-aged part-timers had watched over the store in the afternoons and some were more responsible than others. On the way back out, I grabbed a bottle of Beck's from the fridge and, on second thought, another for Rick.

"Here, man, hold these." I handed the cold green bottles to him and locked up the back, double-checking the padlock on my shaping bay. "Good to go."

Rick took a swig from his bottle. "I can't afford the good stuff," he confided.

"If I drank more, I probably couldn't either," I told him, "but I only allow myself one a day."

He took another drink and grinned. "Well, I reckon I blew your budget for today." I chuckled along with him, while telling myself I wouldn't be having any beer tomorrow. Rick needn't know how much truth there was to his joke.

The house between our two places was unoccupied and had been for some time. The last tenants had some idea of turning it into a cafe. One morning, they were simply gone, another case of too much dream and not enough cash.

We cut through the overgrown backyard. Volunteer mimosas poked up through the ragged grass, a common enough occurrence for most of us around there — and around Florida in general — to consider them weeds. Someone should knock them down before the job required more than a lawnmower.

I caught something out of the corner of my eye. "Rick." I put my hand on his arm. "I think I saw a light inside the house."

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He turned to look, but neither of us could see anything out the ordinary now. “Maybe a reflection?”

“Maybe,” I allowed, “or headlights finding their way through from the front somehow.” I shrugged. “Thought it moved, like a flashlight.”

“Could be kids. But now, you know, I’m gonna be as careful of locking up tonight as you are.” Rick knew my obsessive ways quite well.

Stepping into Rick’s own backyard was like crossing from a jungle to the desert. It’s not that he and Kay didn’t make an effort. There was just too much traffic, friends, kids, for much to grow successfully. Several neat stacks of lumber, under tarps, gave testimony to Rick’s sometime employment as a carpenter.

Oh, and dogs — they did their part to keep the lawn from thriving. The number varied but there were always at least a couple or three to greet visitors.

Rick had already finished his beer and tossed the green bottle into a drum outside the back door. “Honey, I’m home,” he called as he stepped into the kitchen. I’ve never known him not to use that phrase.

Kay gave him a peck. “How was work?” she asked.

“We got all the framing finished. Electrician is coming in tomorrow.”

She nodded. With construction as slow as it had been, Rick would have some idle days before he got called back to do trim work. “Hi, Ted,” Kay said to me. “Hey, I sold one of your friend’s paintings today.”

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“Pat’s? Which picture?” I knew Pat from my college days. We both skipped a lot of classes back then to hit the surf.

“The one he called ‘The Falls.’ That’s near where he lives, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so. Never seen that particular spot.” Pat lived across the state, these days, on the Gulf coast. Almost due west of us, actually.

Rick was peeking into the oven. “Meatloaf?” He looked up at me and grinned. “Wrong night to invite a vegetarian to dinner.”

“No problemo,” I replied. “Kay’s mashed potatoes are always plenty good enough for me.”

“Where are the kids?” asked Rick.

“Jan has a class tonight.” The look Kay gave her husband said that he should have known that. “Richard is upstairs.”

Rick went upstairs, too, to wash up. This was one of the very few two-story houses in the area — I suspect that the frame upper story had been an addition to the original block ground floor. I sat down with my beer while Kay prepared the potatoes. I could smell the sweet, pungent garlic she had added. Kay did them properly.

“We have new neighbors,” she said. “They’re going to reopen the motel. Set the table, will you?”

“I hope they can make a go of it. The white plates?”

Kay nodded. “And the wine glasses. I think I want some Merlot with my meatloaf.”

I placed glasses for her and myself on the Formica-topped table. I knew that Kay was breaking out the vino because I was there. The Richards, Senior and Junior, would not be joining us.

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“By the way,” continued Kay, “the new neighbor is female, and single. You should make her acquaintance.”

She didn’t even attempt to make it seem an innocent remark. Kay Bell was always trying to set me up with someone.

Chapter 2

The first thing I do, most mornings, is to walk down to the beach to check the surf. After I turn on the coffee maker, that is.

The stiff breeze from the north-east already told me that there would be no surfing today but, hey, it was my routine. The first real cold front of the season had brought the waves up yesterday but now this wind was creating nothing but turmoil — what we called ‘Victory at Sea’ conditions. The kids probably had no idea where that description came from but it had become part of the idiom.

It also forced me into sweats. I hate wearing any more clothes than I absolutely have to.

I moved slowly along the cracked sidewalk, into the wind, and past the empty house next door. It very much looked deserted this morning. But at that hour, in the gray of almost-dawn, everything tended to look deserted.

For a moment, I stood in front of *Kay’s Korner*, the Bell’s home, and looked across the roadway. Their place didn’t face directly onto A-1-A as did my shop or the house between us. Being on a corner, the builder had chosen to set it diagonally on its lot, with a curved drive in front opening to both streets.

That meant it faced the motel, on the opposite corner — the *Easy Breezes*. I could see a vehicle, an older mini-van, parked near the office. There was no activity, of course. Sensible people were still in their beds.

The street along the south side of the motel provided beach access and parking. Occasionally, when short on time, I would come over here to surf, though I more commonly drove my truck

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the half-dozen blocks up to the pier. It was almost always better there. I'll explain why sometime.

I crossed the empty highway. Officially, it was a highway, and a national one, to boot, but it was little more than another two-lane street to we who lived along it. I hoped it would never be anything more while I was there.

As expected, the waves were a mess. No surfing today. I stood watching them a while, shielded from the wind by the corner of the motel's retaining wall, before turning back.

Barking began, first one dog and then what sounded like all of them, as I passed the Bell's house. That will get Rick out of bed, I told myself.

I paused before the abandoned house. No, I didn't see anything nor feel a sudden premonition. None of that dramatic stuff — I was just curious and, after all, the place was next door. If anything was going on, I should know about it.

Up the drive I went, into the carport. From my place, all this south side of the house was a familiar view so I knew there was a door I could try. No, locked. The windows here were too high up to look into, what with the carport floor being a good bit lower than the rest of the house. I'm not exactly a tall guy, either.

Around to the front door. It was locked, too. I felt a little creepy, trespassing like this, even if I did cut across the backyard all the time. Too many untrimmed plantings grew under the windows here, so I didn't even try to peep in.

I was about to slip through the scraggly hedge and back onto my property when I thought, what the heck? and decided I might as

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well check the rear while I was at it. There were big sliding glass doors back there, opening onto a patio. Even if they were latched, I could get a good look at the interior through them.

Trash and cigarette butts littered the concrete slab. Someone had definitely been back here. Maybe just kids hanging out. I'd probably never notice them from my place, unless they made a lot of noise.

The doors were locked. I knew enough about these sliding doors that I could probably jiggle them open if I were inclined. No reason to, though. I could look in here and the front windows were letting in the light of the rising sun.

I could see right away that there was more trash strewn inside. Squatters? I've nothing against the homeless finding themselves a home, especially when it belongs to the bank. Even next door, as long as they didn't bother me. I certainly didn't plan to call the police on them or anything of that sort.

That was until I saw someone lying on the floor. I was pretty sure he wasn't sleeping.

Chapter 3

“Looks to be an overdose,” said Bill Cotton. Bill was police chief here in Cully Beach, with a dozen or so officers to oversee. I think every one of them had shown up this morning, even the bicycle patrol. “Reckon I should get a statement from you.”

“Come on in.” I’d been standing outside the shop, sipping coffee and watching the comings and goings of the police, a couple guys from the regional medical examiner’s office, and, now, a hearse. Despite the breeze, it had turned into a beautiful day, sunny and only a bit cool. The cold didn’t linger, this early in the season. “Want some coffee?” I asked, as we stepped in. The door, as usual — unless the weather was really cold — stood open. I think of it as an invitation for the curious to come in and I save money by not running any AC.

“No thanks. Been drinking it all morning. Might need to visit your restroom.”

“You know where it is.” The facilities had seen a steady stream of visitors from next door.

“Uh-huh. What time did you see the body, Ted?” I had hopped up on the counter and sat there. I liked to survey the shop from that position, sometimes, like a king watching over his realm.

“Hmm. I got up around Five, like usual, and took my morning walk. I’d guess maybe Five-thirty? Whatever it was, I called, like, within a minute of seeing it there so you guys should have a record of that.”

Bill looked at his notebook and nodded. I guess my time-frame and his agreed. “Why were you looking in the house, anyway?”

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"Thought I saw a light in there last night. Or at dusk, I should say. Rick Bell and I were cutting across the backyard."

He glanced up at me. "You didn't check it out then?"

I shrugged. "Didn't think much of it. Wasn't even sure I saw it. And I had a dinner invitation."

"Good enough. Like I said, probably an overdose. He was definitely a junkie."

"I hope you didn't leave too many fingerprints," Bill went on, with a bit of a wry smile. "We'll be checking those we find just as a matter of routine."

"Um, 'fraid I tried both the doors before going around back."

"Not a big deal. Yours are on file, right?"

"Yeah." Some of the work I'd done with kids had required a background check.

"Okay." Bill took a look around the shop. "How's business, Ted?"

"Good enough, but the new competition is getting the tourist traffic." A rival shop had opened up near the pier. There had been others over the past few years and none had lasted. Mine wouldn't have if I didn't own my building. That saves a lot on overhead.

"You have better stuff. Be right back." Bill disappeared into the restroom.

I did have better stuff. No junk for the weekenders in here. A helmeted head peered in through the doorway. "Is the chief in here?"

I pointed toward the restroom. "Taking a leak." I recognized him as one of the two bike cops, but couldn't remember his name. If he got close enough, I could read his tag.

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“Oh.” He looked unsure whether to stay or wait outside. After a moment, the policeman stepped inside and gave the place a good look. “So this is surf-rat central.”

Though I called the kids surf-rats myself, I didn’t think he meant it as anything but derogatory. I could read the name-tag now — J. Trejo. Jaime, I recalled, but he went by Jim. Jim and his partner usually patrolled the area within a few blocks of the pier and rarely came this far down the road.

Bill came out of the restroom, glanced at the patrolman, and then told me, “I’m afraid we’ve gotten your place kind of smelly.”

“Hey, that’s why they call it stinkie,” I replied. “I’ll get one of the kids to clean it when they come in after school.”

The chief chuckled and asked, “Whatcha need, Jim?”

I could see that the man didn’t like that. Probably wanted to be called Officer Trejo while on duty. Bill was an old-school Southerner and not one to be a stickler for such things, but I think he noticed it too.

“Sir, the medical examiner wanted to talk to you before leaving.”

“Oh. Tell the doc I’ll be right out.”

“He’s a good guy,” said Bill after Trejo left. “Just hasn’t got all the military out of him yet.”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t about to badmouth Officer Trejo but I’m sure I sounded less than approving.

“I have heard some complaints about him riding the kids who hang out at the beach. You probably hear a lot more of them.”

“It’s an old story, Bill, cops and surfers. It was happening forty years ago when I was a kid.”

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Bill Cotton laughed at that. "But you never got into trouble, did you? The quiet kid who avoided confrontations, I would guess."

"Ah, but we're the ones who are likely to snap and go postal one day," I told him. "You'd better warn Trejo to keep an eye on me."

"I'll keep that in mind! See ya later, Ted." He stepped out into the sun and crossed my drive and the somewhat trampled hedge to go talk to the medical examiner.

I followed him as far as the doorway. From that vantage, I could see gawkers along the sidewalk. Rick and Kay were standing down in front of their place. I didn't know the woman who was with them. Maybe a customer.

It was warming up nicely. I might be back in shorts by afternoon.

Chapter 4

I tended to be rather irregular about opening the shop on weekday mornings. If there was no surf or I didn't need to run errands, I might even have the door open by the Ten AM promised on my sign.

Anyway, in the afternoons, I usually had someone else there to help out. Part-timers, mostly students. Some I trusted to watch the place on their own while I tended to other business or went back to work in the shaping bay.

Janice Bell, one of those I trusted, was coming up the walk, accompanied by a dark-haired girl, a head taller than she. Janice, like her dad, was on the compact side, and her freckles and sun-bleached hair marked her as the surfer girl she was.

"Hey, Shaper, I hear there was some excitement here this morning."

"More inconvenience than excitement," I replied. I turned my eyes to her companion. She looked to be around the same age.

"This is Charlie," said Janice. "Charlotte Jackson. She just moved in at the motel."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Ted Carrol." Though the young woman seemed a bit reticent, shy maybe, I took her hand and shook it.

"But we all call him Shaper," Janice told her, "because he builds surfboards."

"Hi," she said, in decidedly noncommittal tones.

"Can Charlie hang here with me?" asked Janice. Her friend's eyes were wandering about the shop now.

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“Sure, Jan. I’ll be back in the glassing room. Need to laminate a couple boards this afternoon.”

“Customs?”

“Nah, just stock for the shop. Generic short-boards.” My expression probably betrayed my lack of enthusiasm.

Charlotte was now staring out the front window. Bill Cotton’s blue-and-white had just pulled into my drive. A moment later, he entered the shop. “Hi, Chief Cotton,” said Janice.

He gave a friendly nod toward her and her friend, before turning to speak with me. “We got an ID on the guy. Or found an ID on him, I should say. That made things easier.” He looked at his notebook. “Vernon Dorrance. Know the name?” He didn’t expect me to, of course. Bill was just going through the routine.

I shook my head. “Nope, can’t say that I do.”

Behind Bill’s back, an odd look crossed young Miss Jackson’s face. Did she recognize the name? If so, she didn’t want to say anything about it, and that was none of my business. She stood gazing at the floor and I turned my attention back to the chief.

“Okay, Ted. Doubt we’ll need to bother you again.”

“Anytime, Bill. And bring money. I have new aloha shirts.” Bill was an aficionado of the Hawaiian shirt.

“I could use a new one for this year’s festival,” he admitted. “Joan, too. You got matching ones in the right sizes?”

“As long as they don’t have to match too closely,” I told him. “Try not to get so much barbecue sauce on them this time.”

“You don’t win the competition by worrying about a few spat-
ters!”

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With that, he was out the door and headed across the drive to his crime scene, where things were being finished up.

“I’m going to go back and get started,” I said to Janice. “Lock up if I’m not out by Six. Or earlier if you need to.” I wasn’t picky about that.

My place was one of the older houses in the neighborhood, a small, squarish, flat-roofed concrete block cottage in the style of the Fifties, but bits of building had been added over the years. That included a detached garage that I had adapted and expanded for my work. Completely separate from my shaping room was the space where I did my glass work — I didn’t need foam dust in there.

But with all the fumes involved with dealing with resin, I did need air. On days when it was practical, I opened the garage door for natural ventilation. This was just such a day.

Two boards, three layers of fiberglass cloth on each, two on top, one on the bottom. I could get that done easily enough and just maybe manage a coat of sanding resin too. The classical station from Jax was coming in decently so I cranked it up and got to work.

No one, as far as I know, likes the sickly-sweet stink of polyester resin, although the faint odor that clings to the finished boards sitting in a shop might waken a pleasant memory or two. Some guys were experimenting with epoxy, which is pretty near odorless, but I was still old-school, polyester over polyurethane foam. It was what I had learned.

I had a feeling I might need to adapt one of these days and learn something different. It would soon be a new millennium, after all.

The laminating resin had set up pretty well and I was cleaning

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up the edges of the cloth with a razor blade, getting ready for my hot coat, when Jan and her friend wandered back. The pair stood and watched without speaking for a while. I imagine that would get boring pretty quickly.

“Thrusters?” asked Jan. I nodded a yes.

“That means they’ll have three fins,” she told her companion. “That’s what pretty much everyone rides.” She smirked. “Except old guys like Shaper.”

“I’ve outgrown the need for training wheels,” I replied. That was my stock answer when someone asked why I still rode single-finned boards. Satisfied with my work on both boards, I turned them over on their stands in preparation for the next coat of resin. Looking up at the girls, I said, “But I do know how these boards work, even if I don’t surf that way myself.”

“Maybe I should have you make me a new ride for this winter.”

“Don’t forget a wetsuit, too.” A sale is a sale, even with Janice Bell’s employee discount.

Jan laughed. “Last year’s will do. It’s not like I’m growing anymore!”

“My mom surfed when she was young,” Charlie volunteered suddenly. For a moment, it seemed like that was all she was going to say. Then, she added, softly, “That was down in Lauderdale.”

“I’ve spent time there.” Time I would as soon forget.

I began mixing my sanding resin in a paper bucket. When I looked up again the girls had gone.

Chapter 5

“There was definitely someone with him in that house. Lots of smudged prints but we don’t know if any will be useful.” Chief Cotton and I stood in my drive, looking in the general direction of the neighboring house and sipping coffee.

I considered this. “If there had been much going on over there, I would think I’d have noticed.”

“I know you go to bed early, Ted. I’ve seen that it’s lights out at Nine most nights.”

Well, of course, the police would have noted that. Especially as my routine had not varied much for years.

“But,” he continued, “chances are it was only two or three individuals crashing. Maybe just the one night. No evidence of foul play, anyway. The examiner’s office says it’s a straightforward heroin OD. Honestly, that makes the whole thing sort of low priority.”

“Yeah.” That made sense. “Was the guy a local?” I asked.

“Last seen in Orlando. Has a long record as a minor offender down south.” Southern Florida was a different world to those who lived here.

Bill threw the last of his coffee into the grass and turned to me. “Everyone knows a certain amount of drug traffic goes through here and all the other towns along the coast. The truth is, I don’t spend much time on that. Leave it up to the Feds and the Coast Guard, y’know, and concentrate on local problems.”

“Looks like this might be a local problem now?”

“Right.” Junkies and dealers didn’t mix well with tourism. That we both understood. “Maybe just an isolated incident,” the chief

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said. "Hope so, anyway." He glanced toward the shop. "Opening up?"

"In a while. Gonna run a few errands first. There should be waves the next couple days so I'd better get them done now."

Bill chuckled. "You know what your priorities are, don't you, Ted?" Glancing again toward the house, he continued, "Hey, try to keep kids from messing around over there, won't you? I know they'll be curious about it."

"Sure thing."

"We'll leave the tape up for a couple days, even if there's no real reason. See you 'round, Ted." He got into his Explorer and backed out the drive.

A few minutes later, I was doing the same in my old pickup. Cully Beach was a low-key, family-oriented sort of vacation spot, and there wasn't much doing on a weekday morning. The early beach walkers, the surf fishermen, were already headed home. Moms who had sent their kids off to school would be showing up at the beach soon, some with their little ones. There were no waves to speak of, so there were no surfers. The sun, fairly high now in a cloudless, intensely blue sky, sparkled on the empty water.

I knew there would be clouds rolling in by afternoon, and a shift of the winds to the south-west, ahead of another cold front. There might even be a small swell by dusk.

Nearer the pier, A-1-A's east side was directly on the beach. No stores or houses up here, just parking, some wooden stairs down to the sand, and then the water. On the other side, was tourist-trap

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city — souvenir stores, snack bars, my surf shop competition. I was used to seeing these businesses come and go.

A couple blocks further north, the coastal highway met another major road, the highway that led one across the bridge over the Intercoastal Waterway, and on into Scott City, about a dozen miles. I turned left there, west. Had I turned east, I would have driven into the Atlantic. Before the bridge, there was a modest grocery store, a *Piggly-Wiggly*, where I usually shopped. A bigger, newer supermarket had been built on the other side of the bridge, and on a couple miles. The new high school was a bit further.

But I rarely had any reason to visit either of those. I pulled into the parking lot, sparsely occupied at this time of the day. A lot of people walked here, though. I loved the familiar, slightly seedy vibe of this old part of town, and I knew it was inexorably disappearing, as condos and hotels crept in. That's where the money was.

My own money had to go into oatmeal and fruit and eggs and all the other necessities of life. Maybe someday I would get an offer I couldn't refuse on my place, and a developer would bulldoze it and throw up a multistory monstrosity. I did have to retire eventually, didn't I? Up and down the familiar aisles I hurried, probably muttering unintelligibly now and again. It was too late to break the habit of talking to myself, the result of many, many hours of solitary work.

A couple other stops, and at barely past Nine I was headed home again. More tourists out and about now, finding their way onto the beach, going in and out of shops, crossing the highway haphazardly. I saw Jim Trejo and his partner ride by and gave them the wave.

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Neither responded, but I doubt they were looking. And probably every other yahoo that drives by waves at them.

Kay did wave back as I passed her place. She was setting stuff out along the drive, racks of tie-dye shirts and jewelry and even paintings. I wondered if Pat knew yet that she'd sold one of his pictures. He ought to drive over and catch some waves.

Then, home. Or work, depending on how one preferred to look at it. I put the supplies away and went into my showroom and just looked around for a few moments. How the heck had I ended up here, doing this? Not what I had expected from life but not anything to complain about either.

The boards I had laminated yesterday could cure a while before I sanded and finished them. But I still had a partially shaped board to work on, over in the other bay. I'd get onto that in the afternoon, maybe. Right now, time to open the shop for business.

Chapter 6

Yes, there were waves this morning. Not big, but decent, and the swell might build some during the day. Best of all, it was a Friday so most of the kids would be in school instead of the water — some were bound to play hooky — and there was no hurry to open the shop.

Warm, too. I wouldn't need a wetsuit. "Hi, Shaper," came a voice from the grayness somewhere to my left. Sitting atop the motel's low retaining wall was Janice Bell and her new friend, Charlotte. "You gonna head for the pier?"

"That I am, Jan. Want a ride?"

"Sure," she answered, hopping down. The wall was low but she wasn't very tall. The other girl remained perched above her. "How soon ya goin'?"

"Half an hour. Be at the shop or be left behind." She had known me too long to take that seriously, of course. "Are you coming too, Charlie?"

She shook her head. "Busy."

"They're expecting their first guests to check in today," Jan told me.

"Oh. I hope it goes well for you," I told Miss Jackson, and turned back toward home. I should take one of the longer boards today, I told myself. Those are cruising waves.

It took somewhat less than a half hour for me to be ready. Pour some coffee, wolf down a couple of muffins, toss a towel and a board in the truck. I was loading up as Jan came down the sidewalk, board under her arm. As she slipped it into the back of the Toyota. I

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handed her a travel cup of coffee, knowing she wouldn't have bothered to brew any at home.

"Thanks, Shaper." She took it but didn't drink. It occurred to me then that they probably had a pot going at the motel.

I pulled out onto the road, lights on this early, and headed north. As we passed the *Easy Breezes*, Jan said, "I saw the lights in there when I woke up so I went over. Charlie and her mom were up and getting ready for their opening." She looked out toward the water, now visible to our right. "Wanted to check the surf, too."

"No classes today, right?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Do you need me in the shop this afternoon?"

"No, best I be there in person at the start of the weekend." I pulled into a parking space just south of the pier. Only a couple other vehicles were there and, yes, someone was already out in the surf. Long lines came in acutely from the north, with the brisk south-west breeze blowing foam back from their crests. It would be a bit difficult paddling into these waves. I was glad I brought the longer board.

"Charlie is thinking of taking some classes in January," said Jan. "She needs to get her GED."

"Oh." I considered this as we got our boards and I locked the truck. Key hidden, but I'm not about to tell you where. "About your age, isn't she?"

"She's a year younger than I am." That would mean around eighteen. Down the weathered steps to the beach we went.

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“Your kind of waves,” remarked Jan. “Long lefts.” She looked toward the pier. “Maybe some rights are wedging off the other side.”

“Probably too much of a northerly angle,” was my opinion.

“Yeah.” We paddled out. The overcast sky promised storms later. With any luck, the winds wouldn’t come around onshore and ruin the swell until Sunday. It should still be decent — and bigger — on Saturday morning. For that matter, it should be getting bigger all day, and coming in at less of an angle. Maybe I could fit in an evening session after I closed up the shop.

After a while, Jan took her short-board to the north side of the pier to catch the short peaks wedging off the pilings. It didn’t look very good but at least she was catching a few. That had proven difficult for her on the feathering lines on this side. I, on the other hand, was able to stroke into them fairly readily on my seven-six pintail, and take long, leisurely rides to my left. I’m a goofy-foot, a lefty, anyway, so being able to face these waist-high waves suited me.

I should build a new board for the big winter waves, I told myself, as I sat waiting for another ride. Maybe I’ll make that my next project. There were more surfers out now, and I had to be courteous and let them have some of the waves. Especially in that half of them had bought their boards from me. Although I don’t like to wear a watch, I could see a clock on one of the buildings on the far side of A-I-A. Going on ten; I’d better get out of the water.

As I took a cold-water shower, Jan came ambling up the steps. She could have surfed longer, I am sure. It’s good to be young. “Heading out?” she asked.

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I nodded. "You coming?"

"Nah. I'm gonna hang with some of the guys. One of them will give me a ride later."

I looked out over the Atlantic. "It should stay good all day. Have fun." With a smile, I added, "I'm surprised your dad hasn't shown up."

"He's working up in Banner Beach today. Maybe this evening." We both knew Rick would probably be too tired to hit the waves. "See you, Shaper," said Jan, and descended to the beach. "Thanks for the ride," she called before heading back toward the pier.

Chapter 7

There was steady traffic at the shop that afternoon. The ‘season’ was definitely upon us, after the slow days of summer. I could see, up the street, several vehicles parked at the motel. In a month, weekends would probably see full occupancy there.

It was the rest of the year that killed places like the *Easy Breezes*. Or like my own shop.

I didn’t get back to the shaping room on Friday, but I did work on my new board in my head. Just under eight foot, I decided. There was a blank on hand that would work. Otherwise, I would have had to add something appropriate to my next order of foam. It was time to make that out, too, and crank out some more short boards for sale. Maybe some custom orders would come in. Nothing like a few days of good waves to get surfers thinking about a new board.

At Four-ish, Richie Bell came in, just home from school. Richie, I and his friends called him most of the time. He was Richard to his parents, who had earlier tried out ‘Junior’ and ‘RJ’ to differentiate him from his father. Richard was what had stuck. “You going out before dark?” he asked me. There should still be a couple hours of light. Hour and a half, anyway.

I looked around the now-empty shop. The arrival of rain showers had cleared the tourist traffic. “Why not?” I replied. “I think I’ll go ahead and close up here.” I considered, briefly, running back up to the pier. “I’m just going across the road,” I told Richie. “How ’bout you?”

“Yeah, me too.” He looked at me, a bit hesitantly, and continued, “I need a board.”

“What happened to yours?”

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“Busted,” he sighed. “Hit the rocks down at the inlet.”

“Okay. I’ll lend you something. You might want some length today.” I went to my rack of used boards and picked one out. “Bring your broken board by and we’ll see if anything can be done for it. At least I could salvage the fins or something.”

“Okay. I’ll need to buy a new board when, um, I can afford it.”

“Could sell you a used one reasonably.”

Richie wrinkled his nose at that. Of course, he wanted brand-new, and probably custom, as well. Though one of my generic short-boards that lined the room would do perfectly well. I locked the front door, turning the ‘closed’ sign to the outside. The boy stood holding the board I had handed him, giving it the once-over.

“Just a little more of a gun than your old board,” I told him. “It’ll work for you. Let me go get my trunks on.” Richie was already in his board shorts. For all I knew, he might have worn them to school.

In a couple minutes, we were heading up the sidewalk, boards under our arms. I had grabbed the same one I had ridden that morning. It should still do well enough, even if the waves had grown bigger.

Not much bigger, I saw when we reached the beach, and not as nice to ride as those this morning. The sandbars that form around a pier or jetty tend to create a somewhat consistent break. Here, the waves crumbled in a more haphazard manner. I knew this spot was fine on a smaller, less lined-up swell — I’d ridden many such here — but that it was unsurfable when the waves got big.

At least the wind was still offshore, blowing pretty much straight from the west now. “Let’s hit it,” I said, and paddled out. There

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were already some surfers in the water, mostly neighborhood kids like my companion, having varied success in catching these waves. As earlier, they were not the easiest to paddle into, backing off just when one thought they were going to break.

I managed four or five rides before we started to slip into dusk. By that time, I had drifted south a block so I rode the shore break in to the beach and walked back. There was Rick, leaning against the retaining wall, and watching his son and his friends.

“Kinda shit surf,” he said to me.

“We’ve both ridden worse,” I reminded him.

“True.” He eyed my board. “On Big Red, I see.” Looking out toward the surfers, he went on, “What is Richard riding?”

“A loaner. One of the used boards from the shop.” I peered in Richie’s direction. “He seems to be doing okay on it.

“Are you going to be getting out tomorrow?” I asked him.

Rick shook his head. “Work. I have to take it when I can get it. Here comes the kid. Thanks for lending him a board.”

“Tell him to hang onto it for a while,” I replied. “He’ll need a board in the morning.”

And I needed a shower. And a beer. And rest. Five minutes later, I was getting what I needed.

Chapter 8

“*Secret Surfboards* is my own brand, ma’am. I build them right out back.”

“Why, who would buy them if they are a secret?” she wondered. That, of course, was my private joke behind the name — no one knew about them.

“Aren’t surfboards made in a factory?” asked her husband, looking up from a display of shell necklaces. “Molded or something?”

“Mostly, no,” I informed him. “The form cores are, of course, but those have to be carved down to the proper shape by hand. Each one custom!” Even if all those custom boards looked much like one another.

“Seems impractical,” he muttered. I did not feel like lecturing him on economies of scale so I did not reply.

I had made an early run to the pier, but left as soon as it started getting crowded. Leave the weekend waves to the weekend surfers was my usual rule. Now the crowds were here, in my shop, and all along A-1-A. The parking lot at the abandoned gas station directly across from my shop was full, both beach-goers and shoppers leaving their cars there.

From time to time, I had daydreamed about expanding my shop into that building, but knew it was out of my price range. Sooner or later, it would be torn down and someone would build apartments. Same with the vacant lot between it and the *Easy Breezes*, unless the talk of putting a park there actually came to something.

Now *that* would really help business.

A group of kids came in, fresh from a surf session. So fresh that

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they were dripping salt water on my floors. Terrazzo floors, by the way, Old Florida style. They were certainly easier to keep clean than many of the alternatives. “Careful with the drinks,” I warned them. Several were holding cups from the convenience store just north of *Kay’s Korner* — across from the *Easy Breezes*, in other words, and first stop for anyone coming from the beach. Its opening had been the death knell for that station across from my place.

“Sure, Shaper,” one replied. I didn’t know his name but he might well have an older brother or sister that I *did* know and was once a surf-rat too. The nuisances of today would be the customers of tomorrow. And maybe even my employees.

Josh was my employee this afternoon. He was a high school senior now, wasn’t he? Good kid, but forgetful — I had to keep an eye on him. Maybe Richie would be interested in filling his slot next year, when Josh went off to college. He would be sixteen by then, old enough and responsible enough. His sister had started at that age, but I think she was born responsible.

I would never have been able to do the job when I was sixteen. Too shy, too unsure of myself. I still am more comfortable working by myself, making something, than I am dealing with people. But I ran a shop so I did what was needed. “Will that be all today?” I asked a trim middle-aged woman who brought a straw hat to the counter.

“Um-huh. Don’t bother with a bag,” she told me as I rang her up. “I needed a hat to wear right now.” She plopped it onto her dark hair and turned to survey the shop. “Nice little place.” Turning back

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to me, she extended her hand, saying, "I'm your new neighbor. Michelle."

I realized, of a sudden, that this was the woman I had seen standing with Kay and Rick on the morning I had called the police. That must have been a great first impression of our little town for her. We shook. "Welcome to Cully Beach," I said. "And to my shop."

"My daughter says I should call you Shaper."

"Ted will do fine," I told her. "How is Charlie doing?"

"Charlie?" She laughed. "If you are going to call her that, I *will* call you Shaper!" Then she looked at me more sharply. "Is that what she told you to call her?"

I nodded. "That she did." Or at least never corrected Jan when she named her so.

"Hmm. Well, okay." Michelle shrugged and gave me a smile. "Then Charlie it is. I'll be seeing you around, Shaper." Out the open door she went, and hurried north along the sidewalk. I saw her wave in the direction of Kay's place before crossing the road.

I could see that Charlie resembled her mother, somewhat. The daughter was a little taller, a little thinner, a little paler. And definitely a little quieter.

Chapter 9

“Kay loves Halloween.”

“I know,” I replied. “Never got the appeal, myself. I think that will do.” I put down my saw.

Rick inspected my handiwork. “Outline looks a lot like your Big Red,” he commented.

“Used the same template. This one will be a few inches longer, just a tad narrower. And,” I added, “have more nose rocker. No concave up front like Red.”

“But there can only be one Big Red. So the important question,” said Rick, “is what color will this one be?”

“Red rails, yellow top,” I replied. Yeah, I had already decided that. “Doing anything different this year?”

“Not really. Kay likes to be at the door, handing out candy, so we’ll just have a few friends over. She says to be sure you know you’re invited. You can even wear that same costume you do every year.” He meant my monk’s robe. I had considered replacing it someday, but someday hadn’t come yet.

“Hey, Sha — uh, Mr. Carrol. I’ve brought your board back.” Richie was standing in the drive, the borrowed surfboard under his arm. He knew his folks didn’t approve of him calling me ‘Shaper,’ so he didn’t when they were around. His sister didn’t bother anymore. He put it down by the entrance to the garage. “Thanks for letting me use it.”

“Sure. Are you going to bring your broken board?”

“Uh-huh. It’s pretty bad.”

“Practically broken in two,” said Rick. “They don’t build ’em like they used to.”

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"If they did, no one would buy them," I told him. Of course, Rick was fully aware that I had built that particular board.

Richie looked over my work and asked, "Is that going to be your big wave board?"

"Biggish," I replied.

Rick laughed. "So you have to build another board for the really big ones?"

"I don't paddle out in the really big ones, Rick," I replied. "Not these days." There was a day when I did, but not now, not at fifty.

"How big have you ridden, Shaper?" asked Richie, forgetting he wasn't supposed to use that name.

"Oh, double-overhead, maybe. Nothing huge." Rick snorted at that. "Big is a relative term, man," I told him. "The first big waves I rode, in fact, were back when I was a kid in Genoa."

"On the Gulf coast?" Richie sounded extremely doubtful about that possibility.

"Hurricane waves. They were breaking out past the end of the Genoa pier and that is one long pier. I didn't know any better and paddled way outside on a long-board and caught a couple. That's when I got the nickname Berz."

"I haven't heard anyone call you that in years," said Rick. He told the puzzled Richie, "It's short for Berserk. Our mild-mannered friend has a wild man tucked away, deep inside him."

Or a death wish, I said only to myself. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that old nickname to the kid. "I did paddle out once on a big day at Monster Hole," I told them. "That's something I would never do again."

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"I don't blame you one bit," Rick said.

Richie screwed up his brow. "That's down at Sebastian Inlet, isn't it? Don't they have a lot of sharks there?"

"Hence the name," I told him. "There *are* monsters in that hole. But the inside breaks at Sebastian are nice. I surfed there way back when it was still illegal. I remember an evening there with Mike Tabeling and the Australian champ, Keith Paul. Great pair of surfers."

"Keith died, didn't he?" asked Rick.

"Yeah. He had mental problems and spiraled down." I shook my head. "Who knows why these things happen?"

"Just thank the lord that it didn't happen to us," Rick said. "We've done okay." He turned to his son. "Sunday dinner should be about ready. Let's head home. And send Jan along," he told me.

His daughter was minding the store this afternoon. "Will do. I might as well close up," I said, looking up at the wall clock. We stepped outside into the cool and clear aftermath of the front, a pleasant end to the day and to the weekend. The northerly wind was settling down, with only an occasional gust now. It had not been a particularly strong cold front. There would be far more powerful ones on the way. The Bells headed across the neighboring backyard toward their home; I headed into the shop.

Janice had text books spread out across the counter. "Midterms?" I asked her.

"Yeah. This seemed like a nice quiet place to study." The show room was quite deserted. And clean — Jan had taken care of business before opening her books.

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"I'm going to lock up the front. You can sit here as long as you want, just latch the rear when you leave."

She hopped down from her stool. "No reason for me to stay, Boss. I need to use the typewriter at home, anyway. Term paper," she explained.

"Hmm, there's a broken Selectric somewhere in this place. I guess it's obsolete."

"All typewriters are obsolete," Jan replied, "but my instructor doesn't know that yet."

"I sometimes think this shop is obsolete," I said, turning the deadbolt on the front door. "And me too."

The girl had gathered up her things and was heading out the rear. She chose to ignore the moment of self-pity. "Will you need me before Wednesday afternoon?" she asked. That was her usual schedule but I sometimes asked her to come in on Mondays.

I shook my head. "Concentrate on your studies. And if you need Wednesday off, don't worry about it."

"The worst will be over by then," she answered. Then, with a wan smile, she added, "Except for seeing my grades. I'm never going to be a straight A student like you were."

"Mr. Edwards must have told you about that." Mr. Edwards being my old friend Pat. "Lot of good it did me." I closed the door behind us and we stood in the drive for a moment. "How is your friend at the motel doing?"

"She and her mom are feeling their way. They have a lot to learn!"

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“Probably stripping rooms and doing laundry as we speak,” said I.

“Yeah.” Jan frowned and stood silent for a little while. “I saw a strange guy hanging around there earlier. He was talking with Charlie, down where the wall would hide them from the motel. And from her mom.”

“Lots of tourists in town,” I allowed.

“Maybe. But he didn’t look the part.” She shrugged and stepped across the ragged hedge. “See you later, Shaper.”

Chapter 10

Halloween. I didn't put up any decorations at the surf shop. That didn't make much sense to me. And I wouldn't be at the door with candy for the little ones. But I might be at early mass the next morning for All Saints Day, even if I wasn't the most observant of Catholics.

Thanksgiving would be ignored at the shop, as well. Turkeys and pilgrims have little in common with surfboards and aloha shirts. Christmas, on the other hand — well, I am fond of Christmas. But between those two fell a local celebration, the Snow Bird Festival. That I would be involved in.

Anyway, Halloween. Just another day for me, and not a very eventful one this year. After the excitement of the previous week, nothing seemed very eventful. The police did come to remove all their crime scene tape and such next door, and the bank sent someone to change all the locks at the place. He even installed a pin on the sliding glass doors to make them entry-proof.

The surf stayed mostly flat. I decided to pull out an ancient long-board one morning and rode some tinies, over by the motel. The motel was always dark when I went past it, on my daily walk to the beach. After Janice's mention of strangers, I kept my eyes open but saw no one.

But Michelle came out and watched for a few minutes the day I surfed. By the time I left the water, she had gone back inside. It wouldn't hurt to get to know her better, would it?

And I finished shaping the new personal board. Finished glassing it and all the others on hand, as well. There were a couple of custom

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orders I needed to start in on, now, and maybe crank out some stock shapes next week. Sales had been good.

Not that I had a big profit margin on the boards. It was the little things that kept a surf shop business afloat, the clothing, the surf wax, the jewelry, all the 'lifestyle' items.

My monk robe was rolled up and in the back of the top dresser drawer in my spare bedroom. I found it, shook out the wrinkles, and pulled it on over my board shorts and tee. Shouldn't there be a rope belt? Yes, there hidden under the flannel pajamas. Those were reserved for really cold nights. Most of the time, I prefer to go without.

A pair of sandals — okay, that completed the look. The sun was disappearing into the trees behind my place as I set out for Kay and Rick's. I'm going to be cold in these shorts on my way home, I realized. Oh well, it's not very far. And real monks managed, didn't they? Having pants legs showing below the robe would kind of ruin the effect.

I had let my on-again, off-again beard grow all week, to go with the look. I guess I wasn't quite as indifferent about Halloween as I let on. The beard was something I didn't think looked particularly good on me but sometimes I just got tired of shaving every day and let it grow for a while. Never managed a whole year.

The Warners were already there. They lived on the block behind us, in a cottage nestled under the live oaks. And Susan and Joy, a couple who owned a little nursery over by the river. And by river I mean the bay, the Intercoastal Waterway, which separated the

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mainland from the barrier island on which Cully Beach, Banner Beach, and the rest lay.

But it was called the river and that didn't bother anyone. Neither did Susan and Joy. Certainly not me — I had an aunt I could tell you about.

Hellos had just been made when Janice came in the kitchen door with the Jacksons, mother and daughter. They must have decided the motel could sit unattended for a couple hours. I noticed Richie perk right up at their entry. I think he might have had a crush on Charlie. In fact, I doubt there was any other reason that he was still hanging there with a house full of adults.

Kay introduced the pair to her guests. "Good to meet you," said Dick. "It's not every day two so attractive women move into the neighborhood." His wife, Jane — yes, they were Dick and Jane — gave him a look that said she expected such from him but didn't approve of it.

Rick spoke up, filling what otherwise might have been an awkward silence. "They are nice to look at, aren't they?"

"If it wasn't for these beaks," complained Charlie, lifting a hand to her nose. She and her mother did have rather prominent ones. I kind of liked them. They provided character.

"We have a French nose," Michelle stated. "My grandmother's maiden name was Duquette."

"We Bells are French, you know," said Rick. I did know, having heard his tale before. "French-Canadian."

Michelle nodded. "Grandmother Duquette was a war bride."

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With a small smile, she went on, "She was a member of the Resistance before meeting my grandfather. Or so she claimed."

"And a hooker," Charlie added.

"Well, yes, that too. But Granddaddy didn't mind."

"Maybe he liked her nose," I offered, and got the intended laugh.

Jan broke in. "Let's get into our costumes, Charlie." The two girls carried boxes up the stairs.

"I'm afraid I don't have a costume," Michelle said, somewhat apologetically. Not that the rest of us looked like we had gone to much effort.

"We'll just pretend we don't recognize you," said Joy. Her multi-colored clown wig was as far as she had been willing to go this evening.

"A couple minutes ago, that was true," her partner reminded her. "Don't you have a costume, Richard?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. Not this year." He looked a tad defensive about it. I guess the boy was at the awkward age that lay between trick-or-treat and adult costume parties.

A minute later, two pirate wenches descended the stairs. Richie definitely approved of Charlie's appearance. "We're going to hang at the pier," said Jan. "My friends will meet us there."

"No alcohol, I hope," said her mother.

"There'd better not be," added Michelle.

"Not with all the police that will be there," Jan assured them. "You want us to drop you at the Rec Center?" she asked Richie. That was a few blocks north of the pier.

"Sure." Turning to his folks, he asked, "Can you pick me up?"

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“Eight and no later,” his father said. “Be ready.” Richie nodded and followed the girls.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t,” I called as they went out the door.

“Aw, Shaper, we want to have fun,” came Jan’s reply.

A couple minutes later I heard her old Malibu’s engine turn over and then fade as she drove north. That car was older than she was.

Chapter 11

“Charlie refused to use that name the last couple of years. She insisted on being called Charlotte.”

There was a surprising amount of traffic along the highway this evening. Michelle and I waited at the corner for a lull, having both left the party fairly early. She wanted to get back to the unattended motel. I just didn’t stay up late and already had my monk’s robe rolled up and tucked under my arm. “Making a new beginning, maybe?” was my conjecture.

“That’s what I figured.” She pondered for a moment. “Trying to go back to who she was. Back before things got bad.”

I wasn’t going to press her on that. None of my business, anyway. “You can cross now.”

She gave me a look. Had she expected me to go with her? “Take care,” she said and, to my surprise, gave me a quick hug before hurrying across. I slowly walked south along the sidewalk, thinking or trying to.

If I had kept my head down all the way, I might have missed it. A little glow in the darkness, a cigarette, across the street. Someone was hanging at the abandoned filling station over there. Should I call the police in the morning?

Or walk over and check it out myself? As long as I didn’t discover any bodies this time!

When I got inside, I did immediately call the Bells. Kay answered; Rick was probably picking up his son about now. “Hi, it’s Ted. Do you have a phone number for the motel?” I asked her.

She probably looked surprised, but that’s just a guess. “You want

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a woman's phone number?" she asked. "Is this a sign of the Apocalypse?"

"Ha-ha. No, I just saw one or more vagrants hanging around the old gas station and thought she should know about it. You, too." I went on. "Hey, why don't you just call her and tell her, okay? Thanks."

I hung up. Yeah, I chickened out but maybe that was the best way to go.

And all of this kind of bothered me, so I had a restless night. At Four, I decided I would not be getting back to sleep and went into the kitchen to make coffee. Too early to walk over to the beach. I stood in the dark shop with my cup and peered out through the front window.

Nothing going on across the road. Not that I could see. If anyone was over there, they would probably have found a spot to sack out. Vagrants need to sleep too.

I yawned and settled into a chair. The radio station was still playing its nighttime classical music program. News wouldn't come on until Five.

And when I woke, the news was on. Okay, only about half past Five. Let's go look at the ocean. It was already fairly light, and clear.

And the ocean was quite flat. Well, flat for the Atlantic. When I was a kid on the Gulf coast, we would have tried to ride waves this size, 'ankle-snappers' as they call them. Different bottom contours, a different sort of sand that compacted harder, allowed us to surf them.

There didn't seem to be any activity at the motel. Instead of

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crossing back over the highway, I chose to walk along its east side, down to the gas station. It was light enough to poke around there.

But nothing to poke into. The place was locked up and the glass all seemed intact. There wasn't even much graffiti. I was making a circuit of the building when a blue-and-white Taurus pulled in.

I recognized the driver as he stepped out. Big guy. Officer Redding was the name. "Watch out for the sand spurs," I warned him. "They grow thick over here."

He gave me a good looking-over. "Mr. Carrol, right? Something going on here?"

"Just saw someone hanging around this place last night and thought I would check it out."

He nodded. "We got a report." He checked a notebook he was holding. "A Mr. Bell called us and said there was suspicious activity."

I laughed. "I'm the one who told him about it. Or his wife, actually. I didn't want to bother you guys with it."

"You should," he replied, quite seriously. Maybe the recent death across the street had made an impression on him. "And you really shouldn't trespass."

I wondered how he felt about the dozens of cars that parked here on the weekends. But I didn't bring that up. I shrugged. "Doesn't seem to be anything here anyway."

He gave a cursory look at the place and nodded. "Okay. Have a good day, Mr. Carrol." He got back into the patrol car and headed north, leaving me a bit bemused.

Still time to make it to early mass, I decided. *Our Lady of the Sea*

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was several blocks north of the pier, a better, newer neighborhood than where I lived, and one with a whole lot less character. There weren't many cars in the lot when I arrived. Most of the seasonal residents hadn't returned to Cully Beach yet.

There sat Jaime Trejo and his family, up toward the front, young wife with baby in her arms, toddler between the parents. I guessed correctly that Jaime was one of the day's readers. He needs to slow down, I thought, as he went through the text. He stumbles over too many words. I idly wondered if he would do better in Spanish. Wasn't there a service in Spanish sometime on Sundays?

I nodded politely to him as we proceeded out, behind the priest. "Officer Trejo."

"Call me Jim," he replied, once we stepped outside. "Have you met my wife? Sara, this is Ted Carrol."

"Oh, the surf shop guy." Her smile was warm and broad. Her accent was pretty broad too — I suspected that Cuba was her birthplace. "Jaime says you keep the kids from becoming delinquents." This was news to me and I probably showed it.

Trejo looked slightly embarrassed. He had a reputation to maintain, after all. "I do my best," I assured his wife, attempting to keep a straight face. "Have a great day."

Chapter 12

It was still pretty early when I got back to the shop, still a couple hours till normal opening time. I felt lazy. Maybe I would start on those custom boards this afternoon.

A second pot of coffee — I don't usually do that, but my schedule got thrown off earlier. I sat on my front step with a cup and watched the traffic for a while. Then I watched the gulls and then the traffic some more. By that time my cup was empty and I was half-asleep.

The phone. Should I let the machine get it? Oh, what the heck? I got up and answered it.

"Cully Beach Surf Shop. Ted speaking."

"Hey Ted. It's Pat."

"Pat! How's it going?"

"Okay, I reckon. 'Bout the same as usual. Any waves over there?"

"Not at the moment. You can read a weather report, Pat. You know when it will come up."

"Yeah, but something else always seems to come up at the same time. I wanted to let you know that I'll be over there next month for your local festival."

"The Snow Bird?"

"Yeah. I reserved a space in the art show." There would be an outdoor art show along the stretch just south of the pier. On the west side of A-I-A, of course.

"Great, man. But you should come and catch some waves sometime. It's not that far." Pat was an old friend. I was allowed to nag him.

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"Yeah. I'll try. Betty will be coming too."

"To be expected. You all are welcome to stay in my spare room." Betty was the wife. An elementary school teacher over in Ruby where the two of them lived.

"Maybe. I don't know how she'll feel about that."

"Hey, it's a nice room. And I won't charge too much. But," I went on, having a sudden thought, "the motel across the way has reopened. I could get you a room over there if you prefer."

"Okay, great. I'll let you know." Pat would never make a decision like that without consultation. "I have lots of new paintings. Maybe your friends can take some more."

"You mean you don't expect to sell all of them at the show?" A joke, of course. I knew these outdoor shows were rarely profitable.

"I might have one or two left over. Anyway, I need to replace the one they sold, right?"

I glanced out the window. Was that a couple bicyclists coming? Oh, the Cully Beach bike patrol, Trejo and Blake. Hadn't seen them this far south in a while. Not since the incident next door.

"Right, Pat. Hey, it looks like I have someone coming into the shop."

"Customers?"

"Police."

"Ah, I knew they would catch up with you one day. Talk to you later!"

"Bye." I hung up just as the officers entered.

Officer Blake had never been in here before, and his eyes roved

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around the show room. I realized that I knew nothing about him. He looked more like a boy than a police veteran.

“Dave, I need to talk with Mr. Carrol. Why don’t you go on ahead without me?”

Blake looked at his partner and shrugged. “Sure, Jim. Interesting place,” he said to me and went out the door.

Trejo was silent for a few moments. “I do think you are a good influence on the kids here, Ted. I know I ride them hard sometimes.”

I nodded. “They need it sometimes.”

“They aggravate me. I have to watch myself and not see them just as privileged white kids doing stupid privileged white kid things,” he asserted. “I’ve seen too many youngsters with real problems.”

“Man, we all have real problems,” I told him.

Jim chuckled, perhaps in spite of himself. He was a serious guy. “I suppose so. Anyway, my actual business here is that Bob Redding thinks you’re up to no good.”

“Really?” Not that he would be the first.

“Yeah. Bob is an idiot. Did he look that place over this morning?” Jim nodded toward the station across the street.

“Didn’t go more than five feet from his patrol car,” I replied.

At that moment, Michelle Jackson walked purposefully into the shop, took my arm and placed a piece of paper in my hand. “Officer,” she said, giving Trejo a nod, and marched back out. Jim came to look at what she had handed me.

“Her phone number? Man, no girl ever did that for me!”

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Surfers are sexy,” I told him. “Happens to us all the time. Now, we were talking about my nefarious activities.” I was even more amazed than Jim, actually, but I wasn’t about to let on.

“I’m going over to take a look,” he said, getting back to business. “Want to come?”

“Okay. Let me slip on some shoes.” I wasn’t going to walk around that place in flip-flops.

As earlier, there wasn’t much obvious to see. But I had more time and more light now and could note the empty cans and bottles, the cigarette butts, the trash of all sorts. “There have definitely been people hanging around here,” Trejo said.

“Yeah, but how many were just weekenders who parked here and went down to the beach?”

“Most of them, probably,” he replied. “But they weren’t the ones who left the wine bottles.” There were empty muscatel and ‘Mad Dog’ bottles.

“Wino stuff,” I noted. “Not what kids would drink.”

“You know what kids drink?” asked Jim, lifting an eyebrow.

“I used to be a kid,” I told him. “But you know what I mean. The Boone’s Farm and that sort of thing.”

“Ah!” Trejo had found something. Just the thing he had been looking for, I suspected. He picked it up with a tissue. A syringe.

I looked at it. “So our OD across the way may have been over here. Or one of his buddies..”

He nodded. “I need to fill the chief in on this. He should have someone patrol here every night.”

“Not Officer Redding, I hope,” was my only comment on that.

Chapter 13

I was a little peeved at Kay Bell. Undoubtedly, she had told Michelle about me asking for her number and then backing out.

Shoot, if I had a mind to talk to the woman, I would just walk over to the motel and do it. I looked at the paper she had handed me. She should have cards printed up for the motel. I might tell her that sometime. And I *would* walk over to the motel to do it. Yes.

Then I smiled at the little scenario I had created. I do that a lot.

I was trying out a new kid in the shop this afternoon. Customers would be few. She could handle it. Leaving her to it, I went back and began work on one of my board orders. Hmm, not much different from stock. Asking for a little narrower board. And no concave through the middle, just flat into a tail vee. The way I would probably do it for myself. Who was this for? Oh, yeah. Well, it should work for him and the way he surfed.

I was truing up my outline when Joan stuck her head around the corner. “Do you want to talk to a Pat Edwards, sir?” She hadn’t learned to call me Shaper yet. She wasn’t even a surfer. Just the girlfriend of one.

“Yeah, be right there.”

All Pat really wanted was to give me the go-ahead to reserve a motel room. And as long as I had broken away from work, I might as well take care of it. I guess I was going to walk over to that motel after all.

But I popped into *Kay’s Korner* first. I don’t think I had walked through their front door in years. There was one of Pat’s paintings, practically hidden by all the other junk Kay stocked. He did good work. Most people would probably call him an impressionist. I

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knew better, but then, I had a useless degree in art history. Being in the same classes at college was how Pat and I met.

But surfing at the same spots was how we became friends.

An older woman, a local I recognized, browsed through the consignment clothing. I think Kay carried that sort of thing mainly out of good will. When she came over, I nodded toward Pat's picture and asked, "Would you want any more of those?"

"Sure," said Kay. "One or two. But maybe something that looks more like this area would be nice."

"I don't think Pat likes to paint beach scenes or waves or any of that. It's those big oaks that seem to get his attention."

"At least they're in Florida. Is he coming over?"

"Next month. I'm going across the way to reserve him a room right now."

"Ah." She probably meant something by that 'ah.'

I lived dangerously and cut diagonally across the intersection to the *Easy Breezes*. Officer Trejo would undoubtedly have given me a ticket. Across the parking lot and to the office. No one there when I looked in. Maybe busy cleaning rooms or something. There was Charlie, sweeping up around the pool. I waved to her.

"Mom's in the laundry room," she called, pointing in its direction, where the two wings of the motel met to form an L.

No, she wasn't. She had heard us and come out. "Hi, Ted. Can I do something for you?"

"I need to reserve a room for a friend," I told her, "so I came on over. I could have phoned, of course."

SHAPER

Michelle let loose an easy laugh. "Okay. Come along to the office and I'll fix you up. This weekend?"

"No, next month — the festival weekend. Friday and Saturday."

She nodded. "We already have rooms reserved for those dates. Plenty left though."

"I expect they won't last." I gave her Betty and Pat's particulars. Those that I knew.

"That's the artist, right?" Michelle asked when she had written everything down. "He's pretty good."

"Uh-huh. I don't know why he lives over there in the middle of nowhere."

"Sometimes, living somewhere like that sounds good to me," she replied. "Very good. Don't you feel that way sometimes?"

"Sure. But there aren't any waves in Ruby so that would keep it off my list."

"I surfed a little when I was a girl." Michelle's voice held a certain wistfulness.

"Charlie mentioned that. Fort Lauderdale, right?" When she nodded, I continued, "I spent some of the worst years of my life there."

"Well there you go. We have something in common, Ted." A laugh followed but I think she was being at least a little serious.

"I did like surfing north from Lauderdale. I remember good days at Ocean Ridge and Boca," I held those memories for a few seconds.

"I went to college at Boca, you know. Pat too."

"Oh, Florida Atlantic. Surfer U!"

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Yep, that was us. There was a fabulous north swell rolling the day I went to check out the campus. That decided me right then!”

My companion grew pensive. “I started college but then things got in the way. And Charlie came along.”

Not my business, I once again reminded myself, but it doesn’t hurt to listen to people. However, Michelle had no more to say on the subject.

But we both ended up having plenty more to say on other subjects, on other days.

Chapter 14

"I saw that stranger talking to Charlie again," Janice Bell told me. "Halloween night when we were up by the pier. They whispered to each other a while when they thought I wasn't around."

"Maybe she found herself a boyfriend?"

She shook her head. "Too old."

"That doesn't necessarily mean he isn't," I replied. "We don't know much about the Jacksons or their past."

"No. Do you think I should say something to her?" So she was going to ask me for advice. That didn't surprise me much. Her parents might not be inclined to keep a secret but she knew I minded my own business.

"I wouldn't," I said. I didn't even need to consider that. "And definitely not to her mother. Charlie is an adult."

"No, not to her mother. You're the only person I've talked to about it, Shaper. I thought —" She hesitated. "I thought maybe you could keep an eye on things over there. I like Charlie. Her mom too."

I nodded. I'd already been doing just that, hadn't I? "You heard about the place across the street, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Mom and Dad were talking about it. Do you think that has anything to do with this?" She drew her breath in suddenly. "Or what happened next door?"

"Right now it would just be guessing." But we both realized that these things had coincided with the arrival of the Jackson family.

Jan changed the subject. "I see you have the new board in your truck. Try it out this morning?"

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"I did. Wanted to see how it worked before taking it out in the big stuff."

"There's big stuff coming. A hurricane." She picked up a pile of tees and moved them. "How did these get here?"

A late-season hurricane had come up the Atlantic. "I guess it's not considered a hurricane any more but it's still a powerful storm,"

"Oh, yeah. I saw that on The Weather Channel. They called it an extra-tropical storm or something like that."

"Surf has been building all day." I glanced at the clock. "I don't think I'll get out in it again but I do want to walk over and take a look. Wanna come? I can close up for a few minutes."

"As long as I still get paid," she stipulated.

I hung my 'just stepped out' sign on the door — I used that one quite a lot — and locked up.

"So how did the board ride?" she asked as we went up the sidewalk.

"It was okay. Kind of stiff in the small waves."

"So is your Big Red. Or so Dad tells me." Rick had tried out that board once.

"It's suited to me. I tend to push too hard and need a board that will push back."

"Hmm." The girl considered that. "Yeah."

Across the highway. The van was gone at the *Easy Breezes*. Michelle was off shopping, maybe, but Charlie sat on a lawn chair outside the office. She got up and came in our direction when Jan waved to her.

Or general direction, as she had to detour around the pool. Then

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she paralleled us, walking along the top of the retaining wall as we went up the road. "Are those good waves, Shaper?" she asked.

I looked up at her. "Not very, at least not here. Probably better at the pier." They were thick waves, about chest-high, and not breaking well here, mostly dumping close to the shore.

"The tide is too high," stated Jan. I knew that and it was probably meaningless to her friend. Charlie jumped down and joined us on the sand. Was the girl getting a bit of a tan?

"I think I'm going to get a body-board," she announced. "You carry those, right?"

She knew I did. "You'll want swim-fins too," Jan told her. "They'll make it way easier to catch a wave."

"I can set you up," I told her, "and you can pay on time if you want." I didn't expect Charlie to have a lot of ready cash.

Jan smiled. "Shaper lets too many people do that."

"I would sell a lot less if I didn't." That was probably true.

"It is coming up, isn't it?" asked Jan.

"It is," I replied. "There should be a huge swell tomorrow."

Chapter 15

A big set steamed toward me. If I paddled hard, I could make it over the first wave — barely. No chance on those following, those dark, steep walls rising from the ocean. Foam feathered already along their crests. I might duck-dive one or two of them successfully but not all; inevitably, I would be dragged into the impact zone. One choice only: I must catch that leading swell and ride it safely in.

It rushed forward, a locomotive pulling a long train of cars. Muscles already at their limit, arms aching, I pivoted, poised for the one last burst that would launch me down its face. Down into that blue-green canyon, down I would plunge, make a long careful turn and find the safety of the shoulder.

Not that I thought any of this; I was all adrenaline and instinct, fear and exhilaration. This was why I was out here. At times, it seemed like this was why I was alive.

What went wrong? I don't know. Maybe the wave was too steep and my fin couldn't hold; perhaps a gust of wind lifted the nose of my board. In an instant, I changed from a man in control to one in danger, from surfer to diver, taking a very different plunge.

Depth was what I needed, away from the impact of liquid tons, away from the board attached to my ankle by an elastic leash. That fifteen pound spear could become an all too deadly missile when launched with the force of a breaking wave. Oddly, though, I did not feel its tug as I struggled beneath the churning water, holding a quickly gasped breath.

At least the wipeout hadn't been too bad. I could retrieve my board and ride in prone on the whitewater from the next swell.

SHAPER

Surfacing, I felt the truth impact me like another breaking wave — my leash was broken, my board was gone.

The shore seemed distant now. No one near me. I was on my own, with wave after giant wave stacked up to the horizon. Here came the next one; I gulped a breath and dove.

It hit hard. I swam deep, but not deep enough for I went tumbling, rag-doll-in-the-washing-machine tumbling. How long? Too long is the only measurement available. I surfaced, coughing saltwater.

Maybe, I thought, I can body surf the next one in partway. If I tried and missed, I would be completely at its mercy; if I headed for bottom, I could avoid the worst of the impact. The approaching wave was larger yet. Which was not altogether a bad thing as it had already broken and dissipated at least some of that overwhelming energy. Turning, I stroked as hard as possible; I knew I was growing weary and it would require a lot of speed to make this work.

For a moment, only a moment, it seemed that I had done it. Then the turbulence surrounded me, great foam hands swatting me, bending me, pushing me under, yet carrying me toward the beach.

Great, I told myself, I'll make it in but drown on the way.

When the surf finally tired of playing with me, left me floating in its wake, I had nothing remaining. The beach looked as far away as ever. You're closer, said the logical part of my mind, but I wasn't buying it.

Shouldn't my life flash by about now? I asked. Isn't that the cliché?

STEPHEN BROOKE

What I felt was — anger. Idiot, my monologue continued, look what you've gotten yourself into now! You're too old for this.

But too young to die. I had to smile at that. Odd time for humor. The next wave was almost upon me.

I was not ready. My lungs ached still for oxygen; I felt I had swallowed gallons of brine. As the engulfing wall of whitewater approached, I took my last deep breath and dove.

Once more through the rinse and spin cycles. Not so bad this time; I avoided being sucked up into the wave but was held under far, far too long. Finally bobbing up again, I needed to clear the thick foam from around me with my hands to catch a breath. And there was the next car in this train.

This time, I was directly in the impact zone. The crest was rising, some monstrous shining executioner's ax, ready to fall on a solitary swimmer. I could not dive again, I knew. I could not hold my breath long enough. I could not survive.

There was nothing to do but try to body surf again. Perhaps the steepness of this wave would make it easier to catch — but, oh, the wipeout that was sure to follow!

Yet, that didn't concern me just then. My fear was of being sucked up that mountain of water, being launched into space with the descending curl, and free falling to the trough below as tons of water cascaded upon me.

You wouldn't come up again, I warned myself. Make this good. I knew I was on the edge of panic.

I will, I promised, with a touch of a smile. Don't be so dramatic.

Then, taking one step back from that edge, I was stroking as

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hard as I was able, arms and legs weakened but working with a focused efficiency. I felt the water lift beneath me, my body beginning to slide down that liquid mountain. I was in. I had caught it.

Riding it was another thing altogether. I could still ‘go over the falls,’ end up an all-too-fragile projectile aimed at the ocean floor. Keeping my body rigid, making it into a human surfboard, I attempted to turn to my left, slide away from the power of the breaking wave. The curl would crash down on me eventually, I knew; with luck, much of its force would have subsided.

I felt it catching up, the shadow of the crest curving above me. Momentarily, I sped through a transparent tunnel. Then, cartwheels in the whitewater.

But I was inside the break now. I floated a few seconds, breathing deeply, taking stock. The beach was closer, but still a long swim. I did not know if I could make it; I did not know if I had enough left. Long lines of foam continued to roll toward me, already broken waves. Weakened, they might be, but they were still capable of tossing me about, another bit of flotsam.

Is it worth it? I wondered. Do I even have a chance? I’m tired; I could rest, fall back here and sleep.

Sleep forever. It was something I’d thought of often enough, anyway. Putting an end to things — maybe that was why I came out here on days like this.

Out here. Out here, I left behind my empty existence ashore, the pointless pursuit of happiness. Live or die, life could mean something for a while. Out here, even as I dueled with the ocean, I controlled my destiny.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Each day we have that choice to live or to die. Most don't think about it, I suppose. Most don't hold guns to their head and wonder if they will pull the trigger.

And some do.

Slowly, I started stroking toward the shore. Some other time, maybe.

Each wave had to be judged as it came: one I might dive under; the next I'd let push me along a few yards. Between, a bit of tired paddling, treading water for the most part.

Maybe I don't have a choice after all, I admitted, and that kind of pisses me. I stole another look at the shore. Closer. A little. In fact, I was now over a deeper section of the ocean floor, in from the reef, where many waves did not break at all. I couldn't body surf here. I'd have to swim.

Stroke by stroke, I deliberately worked toward the beach. I had never been so weary; my arms and legs would move only by conscious command. Left. Right. Left.

It would be pretty stupid to drown when you're this close. The thought both amused and irritated me. Keep paddling. Right. Left. Right.

Then I was at the inside break, smaller waves dumping on a sandbar. Dazed and drained though I was, I found myself body surfing one into knee-deep water. I waded the last few yards to the beach.

Two boys waited at the water's edge. One held my surfboard.

"Hey, Shaper, I got your board for you. It's okay." Holding the

SHAPER

red-and-yellow escapee up for inspection, he continued. "That was pretty bad out there, wasn't it?"

I agreed that it was.

"We watched you swim a long time." He nodded in the direction of his friend. "Robby thought we should call 911 or something, but I figured you were gonna be all right."

"Sure, wasn't a big deal." I gave the pair the best smile I could manage. "Thanks for picking up my board."

I took it from him and walked slowly to my truck.

Chapter 16

There were 'left-over' waves the next morning. I could see that as I made my early morning surf check. Did I want to go out?

Sure, why not? It looked okay right here. Fun, in fact. I'd walk back over after some breakfast.

There was somebody standing on the beach, smoking. He turned and looked at me for a few seconds, and then back at the water. Not Charlie's mysterious friend — this looked to be a younger guy.

Nobody local. Didn't look like a surfer, either, though they came in a variety of wrappers. And definitely not one of the fishermen that I was more likely to meet this time of day.

He chose to ignore me. Maybe I'd get back over here with my board a little sooner than I had intended. I'd told Jan I would keep an eye out, hadn't I?

So here I was, being all protective. I couldn't help thinking that he might be one of those that had been hanging around at the abandoned station. No real reason to think that but no reason not to.

Anyway, he was gone by the time I got back, maybe three-quarters of an hour later. It was just light enough to get into the water, the sun peeking over the horizon. No one else was out yet.

What do you know? Here came Rick. Must not have any work today. This was a weekday, wasn't it? I sometimes lost track.

"Hey, Ted," he greeted me as he paddled out to my position. "I saw you coming over with your board." He gave it a good look. "I've never seen you on that one before."

"I grabbed it out of the used boards rack. Wanted to try something different."

"Ted Carrol on a thruster? Will wonders never cease?"

SHAPER

"I need to keep up on what the kids are riding," I told him. "Going left!" I called as I stroked into a peak.

Rick didn't stay long. Maybe he had a job to get to after all. I didn't ask. I didn't stay out as long as I might usually, either. I still felt tired from yesterday, and not just my body.

Michelle was on the beach when I came in. The look of concern on her face surprised me. "I hear you almost drowned yesterday," she reported. So that had become gossip? I could imagine the string of retellings before it had reached her ears. Maybe starting with Robby. I knew he was one of Richie's friends.

"It's not the first time." Probably not the last, I thought to myself. Better not to say it out loud.

"You're too old for that sort of thing!"

I couldn't help laughing at that and she looked a bit peeved at me, but joined in after a moment. "I feel kind of old today," I told her.

She nodded in agreement. "I feel old lots of day. I'll admit that I hit the big four-oh earlier this year."

"So? I hit the bigger five-oh."

She was surprised, I think. "Really? I would never have guessed it." I probably should have returned the compliment but it would have felt clumsy. And it would have been a lie. Michelle was a believable forty, an attractive enough forty, but forty none the less.

It hadn't occurred to me before but now I wondered if that ten year age gap would change how she saw me. I rarely thought about my age, maybe because I spent so much of my time around kids.

STEPHEN BROOKE

But I did know I looked younger than I was. Staying in shape was part of that. So was still having a full head of hair.

“Forty is nothing,” I assured her. “Why I was still growing up then.”

“You mean you’re all grown up now? Could have fooled me.” Then her smile gave way to a more serious regard. “Maybe you are. Certainly more than most of the men who have been in my life.”

That was not a statement for which I had a response. I don’t think she expected one. Instead, she asked, “Is it the surfer kids who keep tagging my wall?”

I followed her gaze. ‘NO KOOKS’ read the red-and-black graffiti, spray-painted on the low retaining wall that separated motel from beach.

“That’s misspelled,” I pointed out.

Michelle gave me a quizzical look. “Isn’t that how you spell kook?”

“It should be K-U-K. A completely different word. It comes from the Hawaiian word for, um, excrement.” I wasn’t going to use the word ‘shit’ around her. I rarely used it around anyone.

She nodded slowly, apparently accepting my statement. “What does it mean, anyway?” she asked. “Who are these kooks?”

“Wannabe surfers. Guys who have the look when they’re on dry land but no clue in the water.” I laughed. “In other words, my best customers. The local kids like to sit on this wall. I hope you won’t chase them away.”

“As long as they stay out of the pool.”

SHAPER

“Easier said than done. They are likely to use your outside shower, too.”

“I’ll send them over to use yours.” Not that they didn’t already. “You’d better get on home and use it yourself,” she continued. “You look cold.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “See you later.”

Chapter 17

The community college — a branch, actually — was located in Scott City. It had moved into the old high school building there when that school had relocated to a new facility halfway between Scott City and Cully Beach. Charlotte Jackson sat beside me in the cab of my elderly Toyota pickup. “Here it is,” I said, not that it wasn’t obvious.

“This is a real redneck town, isn’t it?” she asked me. “It’s a completely different world.”

“It is. And only twelve miles from the beach. But,” I assured her, “there are plenty of good people here, too.”

“Oh, I know. My dad is kind of a redneck.” She’d never mentioned him before, nor had Michelle. “Well, I’d better go in.”

“I’ll walk with you to the office. After that, you’re on your own.”

“Okay, Shaper. Thanks.” It might not be mid-November yet but Charlie needed to be thinking about signing up for her GED class in January. I wondered when she had dropped out. And why.

Again, none of my business. But I had volunteered to drive her over here. Jan would have, willingly, but I think Charlie felt she needed to do things without depending so much on her self-assured friend. Who would probably be driving her to class next year.

No, Charlie didn’t drive. I assumed she had lost her license for one reason or another.

So we went to administration and I pointed her at the proper desk. “I’ll be outside,” I told her. Fifteen minutes later she emerged with a handful of papers and a smile.

“I was afraid that being new here might cause trouble,” she told me. “But I guess it doesn’t make any difference for the GED class.”

SHAPER

“Want to see the campus?” I asked. She didn’t object.

“It reminds me too much of high school,” she said after a while. She sighed. “I couldn’t stand being in school.”

“It might look like the high school it once was, but college is a completely different experience,” I told her. “Once you get that GED you might want to sign up for some classes.”

Charlie was doubtful. “I don’t know what I’d take.”

“You don’t have to decide right away, not in the first two years. Jan doesn’t have a major.”

“She wants to be a teacher,” announced Charlie. That didn’t surprise me. The girl had hinted of it in the past.

“As long as she avoids art history, she’ll be okay.” My companion didn’t understand the reference.

“Elementary school. She wants to teach little kids.” Jan leading a troop of first graders? Yeah, I could see it. She should talk with Betty when she and Pat came to visit.

I had to stop by the little gallery of student artwork while I was there. It was mostly pretty dreadful stuff. “I could do better,” Charlie whispered to me.

“Well, there’s your major for you,” I whispered back. “Ready to go?”

We headed east. Most of the land on either side of the highway was empty. Empty of people, that is. There were farms and trees and all of that. Grazing land, a lot of it, as the sandy soil was not suited for much else. We passed the new-ish *Winn-Dixie* on our right. “Mom came here to buy groceries the other day,” Charlie said, just to say something.

STEPHEN BROOKE

There were some older houses along the road now. This part of the county had once been mostly black and still was, some. But the families that had lived here for generations were slowly moving out, their farms giving way to subdivisions and golf courses. Those were set back from the highway, for the most part, but one could glimpse them behind their walls and windbreaks.

The bridge rose in the distance. No draw bridge here — the span had been built high enough for most traffic to pass beneath. I pointed toward our right as we approached the river.

“When I first moved to Cully Beach, I stayed in an old trailer park down there, right on the waterway,” I told Charlie. “It’s probably gone now.”

“I remember living in a trailer. I was little then.” She sat in silence for a moment, then continued. “That was before we moved to Orlando.”

Charlie laughed. “Gee, that was long ago. I liked it there. I remember us celebrating the holidays, mostly.” She looked out at the water as we crossed the bridge, watching a fishing boat head down the river, and then turned toward me. “Where do you eat Thanksgiving dinner, Shaper?”

“Um, you know I’m a vegetarian, right? I don’t usually get invitations.” I had turned down the Bells frequently enough that they no longer asked.

I stopped at the intersection with the coastal highway, one of the few traffic lights in town. Right on red is the rule in Florida, so I took the turn and headed south.

SHAPER

Charlie was thinking. “Do you like mac and cheese?” she asked.
“My mom makes great mac and cheese!”

Chapter 18

"I didn't know you once lived across the river," remarked Jane Warner. "It must have been before we moved here." Jane was the postmistress and I had a package to mail. A replacement surfboard fin, if you must know.

The chain of gossip on which that item had traveled would have Charlie on one end and Kay on the other. Jane and Kay were great friends.

"Ten years ago. It was just for a few months while I was looking for a place to buy," I told her. "I had come into some money and decided this was where I wanted to be. How much?"

"Want insurance? No?" She weighed it and I paid it. Too much, but I was trying to keep a long-time customer happy.

"You found a great location. And you're a good neighbor."

"I hope so. It's certainly much nicer than that trailer park was." The place had been full of drugs. Maybe it still was.

Jane handed me a receipt and I exited. I didn't really feel like gabbing with her. I rarely did. Yes, it was nearly ten years now since I had come to Cully Beach. I'd visited here before, pretty much fell in love with the town, but had other places I needed to be back then.

I pulled out of the post office parking lot and drove one block north. This put me across the Scott City roadway from the *Piggly-Wiggly*. I combined the two destinations when convenient.

This was supposed to be my last place, the place I would never leave. I was beginning to have doubts of that. Maybe I should talk to Jane's husband. He sold real estate. It wouldn't hurt to see what my place might be worth.

SHAPER

No, no. Not yet. You're just feeling down, Ted. Give it a couple days and you'll love it here again.

I didn't need much today. Hadn't even bothered to make a list.

I'd heard good things about the panhandle coast. They had nice waves at Panama Beach and homes were inexpensive compared to here. I would want to retire someday, wouldn't I?

Prune juice. I'd forgotten I needed that. And why not a bottle of wine, too? I was glad that they had a decent enough selection here that I needn't go anywhere else.

And then home, back to my routine. Maybe that was the problem. Too much routine. But then, I was probably better than most in that respect. I might not bust loose on the weekends or go much of anywhere, but I had a lot of freedom in my everyday life.

I pulled into my drive and stopped to look at the place for a minute or so before going all the way back. It was my place, my very own *Cully Beach Surf Shop*. That still sometimes amazed me. I had accomplished something.

Who was working this afternoon? I guess I would remember when they showed up. There was plenty to do in my workshop but right now it was time to open up. Get that door open to the day and invite life in.

It turned out to be Jan's day to come in. I had remembered that after a while. I also remembered that she wanted to leave early for a date. Janice did date, though I don't believe she ever had any sort of steady boyfriend in the years I had known her. The Bells had shown up in Cully Beach a couple years after me and she would have been, what, eleven? Yeah. Cute little freckled kid who took to the water

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immediately. Nineteen now and probably off to one university or another soon.

Cully Beach wasn't going to hold onto that girl. Neither would any local boy, I reckoned. She would go off somewhere to teach and meet a nice guy — I hoped he would be nice — and have a family and forget about surfing and nights on the beach and old neighbors who shaped surfboards for her.

Dang. It was all I could do to keep from crying when she came in.

Chapter 19

I had plopped myself down on the top step, leaving room for beach goers to get past me. My board rested in the sand at the base of the stairs.

Above me, Richie sat on the railing. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. I might even give you an answer."

"Well — Robby says you are and I don't think so but —" He swallowed and then blurted it out. "Are you gay?"

"No, I'm kind of depressed, to tell you the truth." Richie smiled at that, my well-rehearsed stock answer. If he knew how true it really was, maybe he wouldn't have. "Okay, I'm pretty darned straight. I've had plenty of time in my life to work all that out."

I looked up. "And don't worry about asking," I assured him. "I get that sometimes."

"'Cause you're not married." He gazed out at the surf, watching one of his buddies catch a wave and quickly fall off his board. He shook his head and looked back to me. "Why not?"

"I could just say I never met the right woman. Maybe that's even true, sort of. But I'm mostly just too set in my own ways and don't like having to change for anyone."

"But isn't being in love — um, don't people want to change, or, um, share or something like that?" He had no idea how to articulate the concept, even though he saw it in action with his parents every day.

"Yeah. Maybe I'm selfish," I probably wasn't articulating all that well myself. "Maybe I'm just not willing to share my time or my life with anyone else."

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“Aw, man, you share it with everyone.” Not quite the same thing, Richie.

“The officer here is the man to talk with about love and marriage,” I said. Jaime Trejo had brought his bicycle to a stop on the boardwalk and heard some of this.

“Seriously, man?” he asked, taking off his helmet. “You’re holding me up as an expert?” He stuck his head under the shower and gave it a blast of cold water. “Ah, that’s better.” It was pretty warm for an autumn day.

“Sure, why not? You have a lovely wife and family.”

“Yeah, Officer Trejo,” said Richie. “Why not?”

The policeman seemed to be thinking through the question before committing to any words. “Focus,” he said at last. “That’s what it’s all about. You have to focus on what you want. Maybe you give up some other things to get it. That’s life and that’s love.”

I thought that was well put and could even agree with it, sort of. But I knew we mostly just blundered into our lives, no matter what we might have planned.

“Did you get what you wanted, Shaper?” asked Richie.

“Some of it. That’s doing better than a lot of people, I guess.”

“Maybe you need glasses so you can focus better.” The boy snickered at his joke.

“You need to be nice to Mr. Carrol,” Trejo admonished him. “He does a lot for you kids.” He gave a bit of a lopsided smile then. “Puts up with a lot from you kids, too. Way more than I would.”

“I think they all know how far they can push you, Officer Trejo,” I told him. “Is your new partner with you today?”

SHAPER

"I'm letting him patrol a while on his own. I can't keep up with the guy!" Jim was a compact, muscular man, but not built for speed.

A girl, one of Richie's classmates, had settled next to him on the rail. I could guess where his focus was right then. And I doubted he needed love explained to him by either Jim or me. Not really.

"I'm going back out," I announced. "I can open the shop late today." At the bottom of the stairs, I picked up my board and looked up at the group. "Time to focus on the first love of my life. Waves!"

It sounded good, I was sure, as I headed for the water. Maybe I had what I had aimed for all along, a lifestyle I had wanted, a business that supported it. If it seemed lonely sometimes, well, like Trejo had said, you give up some things to get other things.

For I very much recognized that being by myself was not quite as bad as having to be with someone else.

Chapter 20

Richie's little joke about needing glasses had kind of hit home. I had found myself needing reading glasses lately. That, I didn't mind but I was concerned about how it might effect my shaping. So much of that depended on a good eye.

I could train someone. Plenty of kids had shown interest over the years, and lost interest just as quickly. I had mostly taught myself, I'll admit, and some 'production' shapers would consider me terribly inefficient.

No matter. I would keep at it as long as I could and wear glasses, if necessary. Maybe someday someone would replace me; maybe not. Chances are, eventually no one would want my boards anyway.

There was Bill Cotton's Explorer. I was in the shaping bay but had a good enough view of the road to the north of the shop. My building blocked the southern view. When I went to the glassing room, I couldn't see much of anything but my own back fence.

He slowed down. Looking at the station across the way, it seemed. Then he turned into my drive.

Getting out, he raised a hand in greeting, took a quick sidelong look into the shop — Joan was on duty in there — and came on back. "Keeping busy, I see."

"When I have to," I replied. "What's up?"

He got right to it. "Do you know anything about your new neighbors?"

I assumed he meant Michelle and Charlie. "The Jacksons? Not much. Seem like nice people."

"Maybe so, Ted, but they had their share of troubles in Orlando."

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He looked at a sheet in the binder he carried. "The girl seems to have had some problems but that's all been sealed. Had her license taken away for DUI too. The mother is completely clean.

"But her husband — that's another story." She's still married? Why did I assume she was divorced?

He turned to another page and began reading from it. "Bradley C. Jackson. Lots of run-ins with the law, mostly petty stuff. Spent time at Raiford for, um, auto theft. And he's a drug user. Suspected of dealing, too, but there's, um, right, no record of conviction."

"And they're still married." I think Bill caught something in my voice, something I didn't realize was there myself.

"Mrs. Jackson filed for divorce some time back. It looks like they haven't been able to get Bradley to sign off on it. Or even find him."

Bill looked up from the sheet. "But here's where it gets interesting. Our dead junkie was a known associate of Bradley Jackson."

There was an obvious conclusion. "You think the husband has followed them up here?"

"We think it's possible. We being both me and the Feds. But he's not wanted for anything. We're just interested in what he might be involved in." He added, "And we doubt that he is alone."

My gaze went to the house next door. "Not when he arrived, anyway." I wondered if I should mention the strangers Jan and I had seen.

He nodded. "Thought you should know what's going on. You, uh, kind of like Mrs. Jackson, don't you?"

"We're friendly."

"Then keep an eye out for trouble. Jackson doesn't seem to be a

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violent man but we don't know about anyone who might be with him."

"Right." Could the man Charlie had been talking to be her father? That would make sense. "I did see a stranger on the beach several mornings ago." What day was that? "A younger guy. Couldn't have been your man. But he was hanging around by the motel before dawn."

"Think you could pick out his picture?"

I hadn't thought of that. That was a staple of detective shows, wasn't it? The mug book. Too bad I hadn't watched television in years. "I could try. I've got a pretty good memory for faces." I laughed. "Just can't ever remember the names that go with them!"

I would talk to Charlie and, yes, to Michelle, before saying anything about the other man. That had been a confidence from Jan. In fact, I should ask her first.

"Tell you what, I'll send someone down here with some of those pictures. This is mostly between me and the Feds and I don't want to draw attention to it at the station." He thought a moment and nodded. "Yeah, I'll send someone in the morning. Will you be here?"

I was pretty sure there were no waves in the forecast and I had no pressing errands. "Should be."

"Fine. And thanks, Ted." He glanced toward the shop. "I need to come back and look at those shirts when I have time."

"We're creeping closer to the festival every day," I reminded him.

"Don't I know it! That's our busiest weekend on the force. See y'later," he said, got into his Ford, and backed out. I could see him

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slow way down by the *Easy Breezes* as he looked the place over. Then he sped off to the north.

A minute or so later, Joan casually walked out the back door.

“Did you manage to listen in to most of that?” I asked, giving her a friendly smile. I knew she had been by the open window.

“I did, Mr. Carrol. It sure is interesting working here!”

“Call me Shaper,” I said, and turned back to my work.

Chapter 21

Sure enough, the promised mug books did come the next morning. Before Nine, in fact. I had stayed at the shop since my usual early morning walk. Nothing there to report — no surf, no strangers.

At first, I thought that the car that had pulled up out front, parking on the street rather than in my drive, was just an early shopper, someone who didn't know I hadn't opened up yet. Well, okay, the front door was open so I guess the shop was too. It seems that Bill didn't want a police cruiser to deliver them. It's true that there had been too many of those around my place lately.

"Officer Blake!" I recognized him as he got out of the black Taurus. Yes, obviously an unmarked police car and anyone probably would have recognized it just as surely as if it had been painted blue and white. Blake was not in uniform but he was pretty recognizable too. "Is this what you do now?" I knew he had transferred from the bike patrol.

"Yes, sir! Cully Beach's one and only plain clothes detective at your service."

I chuckled. "A temporary assignment, I suspect?"

"I'm afraid I'll be back in uniform tomorrow, Mr. Carrol."

"Ted," I told him. "What happened to your bike-riding career?"

"Oh, I decided it was time to move on. And Trejo is such a hard-nose. Good guy but I got tired of trying to keep up with him. Call me Dave, by the way."

"Okay. Let's see what you have. Come on back to the kitchen. We can use the table there." He plopped four good sized volumes onto its round wooden top. "How 'bout some coffee?"

"Sure," he said, "if you're making it anyway. These are books we

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borrowed from the Feds.” By ‘the Feds’ he meant the DEA. I could see their logo on the covers. I had wondered who Bill Cotton was referring to when he kept saying that.

“These are guys who have been arrested for drug offenses in the Orlando area,” he said, shoving one of the books toward me. “Might be a good place to start.”

It was indeed. A good place to end, too, as I found my man within ten minutes. Blake called Chief Cotton immediately to report, gathered up his books, and took off. He didn’t even get to finish his cup of coffee. And it was good Colombian stuff, too.

Ray Manuel. The name meant nothing to me, of course, and there had been no information in the mug book — just a picture, a number, a name. But I would remember. In fact, I would write it down to be sure. Should Michelle and Charlie know about him?

I’d have to make that decision when the time came.

That afternoon was not the time, even though the Jacksons popped into my shop. Charlie let her mother do most of the talking.

“Charlie wants a, what do you call it, dear? Oh right, a body-board. She’s going to be a surfer girl.”

“I could give you a good deal if you bought a pair of them,” I said, giving them a smile. “Mother and daughter surfer girls.” It was worth a try.

“Ah, no, Ted, I think not. I can always borrow hers, after all.”

“Okay. They’re stacked over there. The Moreys are the good ones, the others are knock-offs. Honestly, though, they’d probably do just as well.”

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“Half the price,” murmured Charlie, as they looked them over. “I could afford the fins then.”

“Within the next few weeks, you’ll be wanting a wetsuit too,” I warned her. “The water gets cold here. Way colder than you might remember from Lauderdale, Michelle.”

“Oh. I never thought of that.” Michelle didn’t take long to come up with a explanation. “It’s the Gulf Stream, right?”

She’s no dummy, I noted to myself. “Right. It comes extremely close to the coast down there but turns out into the Atlantic north of Cape Canaveral.”

“I thought they called that Cape Kennedy now.”

“Just the space center. The cape itself is still Canaveral.” For a moment, memories of surfing the Canaveral Jetty, just across the inlet south of the space center, came to me. I had camped there the first time I had ever made a surf trip to the East Coast as a teen. “It’s mostly a matter of picking the color you like,” I said, returning to the topic of the body-boards. “And I would recommend the shorter length.” It wouldn’t float her as well but it would be easier to get it out through the breaking waves.

“I like the orange,” Charlie stated, picking up a board of that hue.

Michelle nodded. “Then we’ll get it. And the fins too, but I think we’ll have to wait on a wetsuit.”

“I always have those in stock,” I said. “Used ones, too, if you’re not picky about the fit.” The swim fins were displayed, logically, right next to the body boards. “Honestly, you could buy perfectly good fins for less somewhere else.”

“Are you sending us to Wal-mart, Ted?” asked Michelle.

SHAPER

“Just saying. But make sure they have ankle-tethers. There’s nothing more frustrating than losing a fin in the surf.”

“Would these ones do?” asked Charlie, holding up a pair. Not the priciest I carried, not the cheapest.

I nodded. “If they’re your size, they should do fine.” She placed them atop the board, and both on the counter.

“I’ll get these,” the girl said. “I’m going to look at the clothes first.”

Michelle whispered to me. “You’re going to let her pay in installments, right?”

“Uh-huh. We can spread it out over, oh, twelve months. Don’t make me come over to the motel and repossess them!”

“Speaking of coming over, Charlie says I have to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner.” She leaned back against the counter, elbows resting on its top, and gave me a look that seemed to hold both questions and mischief. “And that it has to be macaroni and cheese.”

I had kind of been expecting this, sooner or later. And I hadn’t made up my mind as to how I would respond.

Why not? “I’ll be there. Should I bring a bottle of wine?” What went with mac and cheese? A zinfandel, maybe?

“No, no. No alcohol around Charlie.” She glanced toward her daughter, busy looking through a rack of sun dresses on the other side of the shop. “But I might be willing to come over here if you feel like opening one sometime.”

Chapter 22

I didn't know the new guy's name. He was young, that was for sure.

"Do you remember when he played football?" asked Rick. That meant nothing to me. I never followed sports.

We were sitting in his truck, the big Dodge pickup he used for work, up by the pier. "No, I don't. Locally?"

"Yeah, when he was in high school. He could have played at a good college if he wanted, but went into the marines right after graduation."

It still meant nothing to me. He was a lanky sort, wasn't he? But with muscles. I could see why Jim might have trouble keeping up with this new long-legged partner of his.

"Do you think the kids haven't noticed we're here or are they just ignoring us?" Rick was looking out toward the surf, where Richie and a friend were catching waves by the light of the setting sun. Rick was here to pick them up; I'd just happened to be on hand and rode along with him. Nothing better to do.

He changed the subject. "So you're doing Thanksgiving with Michelle? Every year we ask you, but as soon as a nice looking woman moves in you accept her invitation."

"Can you blame me?"

Rick chuckled. "Not at all. But we were surprised. Especially after Kay has been trying to set you up with girls for years. Looks like the boys are coming in."

"I think you're the one who needs glasses, man." I'd started carrying — and using — my reading glasses and folks had been bound to notice. "That's a girl with your son."

"Hmm, so it is. The Collins girl, isn't it? Their place isn't much

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out of the way.” He turned to me. “Think we can squeeze them in up here? If there weren’t two cops across the street, I’d put them in the back.”

The kids were up on the boardwalk now, rinsing themselves and their boards under the outdoor shower. At the same time, the bicycle patrol had come across A-1-A and rolled up along my side of the truck.

“Hi Ted,” said Trejo. Peering into the cab, he added, “How you doing, Mr. Bell? You know my new partner?”

“Jay Johnson,” said Rick. “I remember you from your high school days.”

But I didn’t. “Throw your boards in the back,” said Rick to the pair of young surfers, who were at his window.

“I’ll let them sit in the middle,” I said, and stepped out onto the pavement. “Pleased to meet you, Officer Johnson,” I said, offering the patrolman my hand.

“Likewise, sir.” Didn’t know my last name and was hesitant to call me Ted, I figured.

“This is Ted Carrol,” said Jim. “That’s Rick Bell in the driver’s seat.”

“Oh.” Johnson gave me another look and nodded. He did recognize my name. My reputation must have preceded me, as they say.

Two wet teenagers had slipped into the truck by now and I squeezed in beside them. The officers could have said something about the lack of seat belts, I reckon, but didn’t. “I’ll be seeing you,” said Jim Trejo. “Take care.” He looked at his watch. “Hey, Jay, we’re off duty. Let’s get these bikes back to the station.” The two peddled

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across the highway, and turned on the first street to their right. The police station was back about three blocks, not far from the post office, in fact.

“How was it out there, guys?” I asked our passengers. I’d been out in the morning. Hadn’t been too bad then, a little southerly swell that had found its way in. It hadn’t been good enough to make me want to get out again this afternoon. I looked past the girl — was her name Cathy? — and added, “And whose board are you riding now, Richie?”

“It was fun, Shaper,” the girl told me. “Richie borrowed my brother’s board.”

Oh, yeah, she had an older brother. He’d never been a serious surfer, not one of the surf rats who hung out at the beach. I don’t think I had seen him in the water since — well, not this year. And he had purchased his board elsewhere. Some generic brand from a shop up in Jax Beach. “You need to let me build you a new one,” I told Richie.

“Here we are,” Rick announced. We were in front of a newer ranch house somewhere north of the pier area. I hadn’t paid too much attention to our route. I slipped from my seat to let Cathy out. Richie too — oh, he was going to carry the borrowed board in. Their goodbye was a casual wave. Might it have been more if two adults hadn’t been watching?

We rode home without saying much. Neither Rick nor I was the sort to pry. We could leave that to the boy’s mother.

Voices drifted through the Bell’s back door, which hung open on this pleasant evening. Kay, of course, and there was no mistaking

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Michelle's laugh. I hadn't realized it was so distinctive nor that I had noticed it.

A bottle of merlot sat half-emptied on the table between them.

"I guess I don't need to invite you over for a bottle this evening," I told Michelle.

She lifted her glass to me. "Save it for another time."

Kay looked from one of us to the other. Then, she apparently decided it was best not to comment. "Shall I pour you a glass, Ted?"

"Sure. I'll get it." I took a goblet from the shelf but let Kay fill it. "Enough," I said at about a third full. I suspect she would have poured it to the top if I let her.

Richie had disappeared upstairs, probably to shower and change. After a minute or so, Rick found a beer in the fridge and wandered off. I heard the television from the next room seconds later.

I sat and sipped. "Ted believes in moderation, doesn't he?" Michelle said this to Kay but it was obviously aimed at me.

"He's surprisingly stodgy," answered Kay.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I told her.

"But you can be obsessive, too," she mused. That was certainly true. "Sort of an addictive personality, maybe."

I had to laugh out loud. "Wasn't the idea of an addictive personality always pretty much pop-psychology? It seems outmoded now."

"I think it is," agreed Michelle. "I've known real addicts."

I had already known this. Had Kay? It wasn't a subject any of us wanted to pursue, that's for sure.

The two went on about other things for a while, people they had

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dealt with during the day, little things that had happened. The sort of small talk I was never very comfortable with.

In fact, it was putting me to sleep. Along with the wine. "I think I'd better get home," I announced, rising. "Thanks for the wine, Kay."

"Of course, Ted. You're always welcome. I'd better get busy feeding my men-folk."

Michelle rose too. "I'll walk with you," said she.

Chapter 23

“I do have wine in the refrigerator,” I said.

“Haven’t you had your quota?” teased my companion.

“It’s worn off. I respond quickly to drugs of all sorts and get over them just as quickly.”

“Fast metabolism?”

“Maybe. Or partly.” I didn’t have much of an explanation. I just knew how I reacted.

“Okay. I’m up for another glass.”

I hadn’t exactly invited Michelle in. She had followed me through the back door without either of us exchanging a word. “I like your kitchen,” she said. “You like to keep it neat, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “As Kay said, I’m obsessive.” We both chuckled at that, not that it was all that funny.

“Thanks for taking Charlie over to the college the other day. She’s actually talking about career ideas now.”

“Zinfandel okay? It’s what I have open.” I stood peering into the fridge.

“That’s fine, Ted.” I poured us each some. I hadn’t used my good wine glasses in ages — had to surreptitiously wipe the dust out of them first. “Charlie had problems you know. That’s one of the reasons we moved here. There was way too much partying and way too many drugs down in Orlando.”

I nodded. I’d heard stories of the ‘raves’ down there, not that I actually knew anything about them.

“Ecstasy was the big thing and I know Charlie used it. But drinking was her real problem. She’s an alcoholic — no sense in putting it any other way.”

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“Is her father?” I felt fairly certain that Michelle didn’t have a drinking problem.

“I honestly don’t know. He disappeared when she was a baby. Dead, I learned a few years ago, but I’ve never told Charlie. My ex is her step-father. She does know that.

“He has problems, but drinking isn’t one of them.”

I knew something of those problems. This wasn’t the time to say anything about that. And she referred to him as her ‘ex.’

“I escaped to this town, too,” I offered. “Different sort of problems but they were real to me.”

She didn’t press me on what those were. “You’ve done well here.” She leaned back and sipped the zin, looking thoughtfully around the room. “You own this building, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I came into an inheritance at the right moment. From something —” What was the word I wanted? “From something tragic came something good.” That still wasn’t quite how I’d wanted to put it.

“Your folks?” she guessed.

“Yes. Both passed away with months of each other. I had gone home to be a caregiver for them in their last days.” I had to pause for a moment — the memories still carried emotions with them. “I haven’t been back to my home town since. That would be Genoa.”

“I know Genoa. We used to drive across state when I was a teen and party on the beach.”

I did the quick math in my head. “I suppose I was gone by then. In fact,” I told her, “I would have been in Fort Lauderdale for a couple of those years.”

SHAPER

"Too bad I didn't meet you then," she said, and immediately got a little flustered. "I've had too much wine," decided Michelle. "I'm saying stupid things."

"Shoot, I don't need wine to do that."

"But it helps," she agreed, giggling. "The Bells are your best friends, aren't they?"

"I suppose so." I gave that a second thought. "No, definitely so. Despite their new-age hippie ways."

"They are into all that spiritual stuff, aren't they?"

"That they are. I like to tell people that I'm religious but not spiritual."

Michelle laughed at that. "You'd better not put that on a dating profile."

"I'm too cheap to date," I admitted.

"I believe it." She reached across the table and took my hand for just a moment. "But I'm a cheap date. We're proving that right now."

"To cheap dates," I toasted, raising my goblet.

"The best kind," responded Michelle, clinking her glass against mine. "But I should get back to the motel." She rose, albeit a little hesitantly. I think we both would have liked to linger a bit longer.

"Let me walk you over. The reports of vagrants hanging around kind of worry me."

"Oh, my knight!" she mocked, but then said, softly, "I wouldn't mind at all, Ted."

It was a brisk night, and the stars were playing hide and seek behind the thin, scuttling clouds. This time I accompanied her

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across the highway, and all the way to the motel. And I got more than just a hug, as Michelle and I kissed, and not briefly, before she went in and I headed home.

Chapter 24

“He’s a bad one, Ted.”

I had assumed as much or his picture wouldn’t have been among the mug shots. “How bad?” I asked Chief Cotton.

“A murderer. They’ve never been able to pin one on him but there’s really no doubt. A dealer and most likely a smuggler as well. Extortion. Assault. Most of those are allegations, not convictions.” The faintest curl of disgust appeared on his lip. He certainly wished there had been convictions. “Out of Miami, originally. Ramon Manuel AKA Ray Manuel.”

I’d been around some bad people in my life — Bill might have been surprised — but this guy was undoubtedly worse.

“Well, if I see him again, I’ll run. And then call you when I’m behind locked doors.”

“That’s sensible,” agreed the chief. He looked toward the house next door. “I see the ‘for sale’ signs are back up.”

“Yeah. Even been shown.” I chuckled. “I doubt the real estate agent mentioned the death.”

Then I asked Bill outright. “Do you think I should mention this man’s name to Michelle Jackson? If he’s a danger, she should know.”

“Tough call, Ted. There’s no known connection to Bradley Jackson.” I recognized that as the evasion it was.

“Bill, we both know they’re involved somehow.”

He sighed. “I can’t stop you, Ted. It might be better if she got it unofficially too, instead of me drawing attention by going over there.” Looking me in the eye, he stated, “Use your own discretion.”

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I nodded. I had said nothing to Bill of that other suspicious man, the one Jan had spied. I decided to keep it that way for now.

"Cully Beach is changing," said Bill. "It's crept up on us both."

"I don't want to change," was my reply.

"Ha, Ted, don't I know it. Maybe that's why you love the ocean. It's always there."

"But it's always changing, too. Dependable but ready to surprise you."

"Sounds like the perfect woman."

That was it exactly. Who could ever measure up to my ocean? "That's why she was worshiped as a goddess in ages past," I told him.

"Wasn't the sea a god?" asked Bill. "Neptune?"

"He lived in the sea. He wasn't *the* sea."

"Oh. That makes sense. If you're a pagan — we Baptists wouldn't know." The chief looked at his watch. "Hey, I have some time. I think I'll go in and look at your shirts."

"Just got some more in. You know where they are." I gestured toward the rack, to our right as we entered. They got more of the natural light that way, by the north windows.

"Great designs," he enthused as he went through them. "You choose them yourself, don't you?"

"Yeah. Some items I leave up to my suppliers but I pick every aloha shirt design that hangs in here. You take an extra-large, right?" I pulled out a shirt with blue and red florals on a tawny background. "I have this one in your wife's size too."

He looked at it for a moment and shook his head. "Too subdued.

SHAPER

And yeah, I know you don't like them gaudy, Ted. Now here — whoa, that's quite a price!"

"Quality costs. Those are real coconut shell buttons, man."

He put it back. "I'd have to start taking bribes to buy that one." Pulling out a deep red shirt, he said, "Now that would hide the barbecue sauce stains. Got it in a smaller size?"

I looked through the rack. "Not small, but there's one in medium. Joan might float in it a bit."

"They're supposed to fit loosely," he decided. "I'll take the two of them."

"You'll be the best dressed cop at the festival," I assured him.

"I'm aiming for best dressed couple," was his correction.

"Yeah. That too."

Chapter 25

It was unusual for Jan to call the surf shop. After all, we were almost next door. But this was her on the phone, asking me to come over to the Bell's house as quickly as I could.

She met me at the back door. "Come with me," she whispered. Upstairs? I followed her to a window on the front of the house — it was obviously Richie's room — where she handed me a pair of binoculars. "Look."

Charlie was sitting in a chair by the pool, talking to a middle-aged man. Barely middle-aged, despite his balding head.

"There's the guy I told you about," Jan informed me.

I adjusted the focus a little. "I know him — yeah, he's local. Who the heck is he?"

"Not her father, then." I think she was disappointed.

"Have I seen him at church? No, no, at the church hall, attending some kind of meeting. AA. That's it."

"AA? What does that have to do with Charlie?"

I lowered the binoculars and looked at Jan. "She's an alcoholic. I'll bet he is her sponsor."

"Wow. We're pretty good detectives, Shaper!" I'm not sure how serious she was being.

"Uh-huh. That's his car, I would guess." There was a blue compact in the lot. Couldn't say what the make was from my vantage.

"Do you think she called him?" asked Jan. "Like she had a crisis or something?"

"Maybe. I hope he's helping."

"Me too." She held out her hand and I gave her the binoculars.

SHAPER

For a while, she looked at the pair in silence. "Okay. I didn't know she had a drinking problem."

"And I'm not sure I should have told you." Michelle hadn't really told me that in confidence, had she? And if anyone should know, it would be her friend Jan. "It wouldn't be a good idea to mention it to her. Not unless she brings it up sometime."

"Right." She seemed just a little miffed by my lecturing. Jan was a pretty competent young lady, after all, and capable of making good decisions on her own. "Let's get downstairs. I wouldn't want my folks to think we're having an affair!"

"Too late," said Richie, standing in the doorway. "Who are you spying on?"

"Shaper's new girlfriend," his sister told him. "He's afraid she has a lover visiting her."

"She's too good for him anyway," the boy asserted.

"I don't need to take this," I told them. "And I left the shop unlocked to hurry over here. I'd better get back."

"I'll go with you," said Janice. "You get onto your homework," she told her brother.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"He'll probably be on the phone with his girlfriend by the time we're at the foot of the stairs," Jan confided to me. "They've been separated a whole half an hour."

As we crossed the backyards, heading toward my place, Jan said, "Charlie thinks she might want to go into design. She's shown me some of her drawings but I don't know if they are any good."

"I could give an opinion but it wouldn't be worth much."

STEPHEN BROOKE

Of course, no one had bothered the shop during the few minutes I was gone. "You don't have anyone here this afternoon?" asked Janice. "Oh, I see. An after-schooler."

My afternoon employee was coming down the sidewalk. "Just like you were for a couple years, girl. It gives me two or three hours I can be out of the shop. Hey," I continued, "do you think Richie might like to work an afternoon or two?"

"Maybe." She didn't seem enthusiastic about it. "He's awfully lazy."

"We all seem lazy next to you, kid. Hi, Lisa, ready to start in?"

"Yes, Shaper," said the girl, sounding not at all certain.

Jan sort of smirked. "You'll need someone new next week," she prophesied. "You should talk to Richie's girl. Cathy. She'd do a good job."

"I'm ahead of you, Jan. Miss Collins wasn't interested. She has what she calls a real job at a restaurant." I watched Lisa standing awkwardly by the counter, unsure what to do with herself, before turning back to Jan. "Could Charlie be interested in taking some hours? I know she doesn't have that much work at the motel during the weekdays."

"Maybe. I've noticed that she is more interested in what you do back in your shaping room than what goes on up here."

"Ah, an apprentice! I have waited all these years for him, uh, her to appear!"

Janice laughed but then said, "Don't believe that I don't know that's true, Shaper. You would love to teach someone your craft."

SHAPER

“Maybe so, Jan. But right now I need to teach someone how to work the cash register.”

Chapter 26

Dick Warner had a Cadillac full of clients. They parked in front of the house next door but came walking up the drive — which was separated from my drive only by the scraggly knee-high hedge and a couple feet of grass — to look the place over.

A rather nondescript man in what I would call golfer clothes gazed at the house for few seconds and then said, “Not bad at all, Dick.” His accent was distinctly British, but not upper-class, BBC British.

His companion, a somewhat stout, dark man, muttered something in his ear.

“Oh, is this where they found that dead fellow? Don’t let that bother you, Mr. Warner,” he said, noting Dick’s crestfallen expression. “Buyer beware and all that. It certainly does not bother me. But this house is a little too close to the highway, don’t you think?” he asked his associate.

“That doesn’t have to be a bad thing,” suggested the other. “Might be convenient.” He was just as obviously not British. A southern boy all the way.

Dick shuffled through a folder of listing sheets. “There is a house up this way,” he said, pointing north. “Two blocks north and, um, three back from the highway.”

Two guys, huh? And no wives. A gay couple? Investors looking to flip a house? Someone thinking of starting a business? No, if the last they would want to be on A-1-A. None of my business, of course, but they were kind of loud. And practically under my open windows.

The Brit spoke again. “That looks like investment property

SHAPER

across the way there.” A sagging ‘for sale’ sign had been on the gas station for two years. “And what of that lodging up the street?”

“The station isn’t in the multiple listings but I could inquire for you,” Warner told him. “As for the *Easy Breezes*, it’s currently being leased. With an option to buy, if I remember correctly.” He lowered his voice just a tad, as if imparting a confidence. “I wouldn’t really expect them to make a go of it. It will be back on the market, probably sooner rather than later.”

“Let’s go look at this other house,” said the heavier man. His companion nodded and they all shuffled back to Dick’s Caddy. They hadn’t even asked to see the inside so I doubted they were interested in the place.

I always knew it was unlikely that Michelle and Charlie would succeed. I just hadn’t thought about it in a while. They were certainly operating on next to no funds, faced with a large payment each month. For a moment, my thoughts went to my own small savings account, the money I sometimes wondered about investing.

No, that was ridiculous. Either the motel would pay for itself or it would fail. I couldn’t help. But these buyers had made me look at the place next door with new eyes. Maybe I could swing a deal on it. I might just call up Dick.

Or not. I might not feel so ambitious after a night’s sleep.

My thoughts went back to the two buyers. If I were on the lookout for suspicious characters, why not them? As likely a pair of gangsters as one was apt to meet! What better way to check out a neighborhood, find a base of operations or an empty house, than to be given a tour by a real estate agent?

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And what of their interest in the motel? I had to stop myself, chuckle inwardly at what was almost certainly a fantasy. Not worth mentioning to Bill, but I wouldn't forget about them either.

It was just about opening time. I pushed open the door — not too cold, it could stand ajar this morning. Turning around, I surveyed the room. This part, just inside the entry, had originally been a small porch. I had expanded out here early on, closing it in, and knocking a couple wider openings into the former living room. There was a step up into that section. That was pretty much all there was to the show room, that and what was once a shallow dining alcove. The rest of the house was living quarters.

The restroom I had divided in two, part for the customers, the other half opening into my private section. But that had left no room for a tub or stall so I showered outside. It would be nice to have an indoor shower. It could be worth buying the house just for that!

But, of course, someone would want to knock all these old houses down one of these days. That was the advantage of having two lots together. Rent out the one house until the proper buyer for both came along.

Here I was, thinking of moving away again. Years in the future, Ted, years in the future.

The day proved uneventful. I spent much of it on organization and taking inventory. With the winter season nearly upon us, I'd best be ready.

But toward closing time, just as daytime traffic on A-1-A was tapering off, a dark sedan slowed down, headed south, and crept

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past the house next door, before speeding away. I could swear the Brit from that morning was in the passenger seat.

Chapter 27

“The point of having a concave through the center of the board is not to channel the water. Get that out your heads right now, because you are going to hear it a lot. If a board always went straight ahead along its center line, it would be true, but surfboards are usually sliding more-or-less sideways.” Charlie, Richie, and Cathy sat in a row, watching me shape a new board. Not just any board — this was the one Richie had ordered for himself.

“So it’s going to have just the opposite effect, right?” asked Cathy. She grasped the concept. Richie gave her a quizzical look. I guess he hadn’t.

“Yes, Cathy. It breaks the water away from the bottom for more speed. Especially during those flat, snap-back turns you kids like to do.”

“How do you control the board if it isn’t making contact with the water?” asked Charlie. A good question. If she hadn’t been riding her new body board it might not have occurred to her.

“Fins!” volunteered Richie.

“Exactly. That’s one reason why most new boards have three or four fins on the bottom — to keep you connected to the wave.” This was all hopelessly simplified, of course, but I think they got the basic idea. “You all get an A for today’s class.”

“Okay, Shaper. Get busy making it now!” Richie ordered. He turned to his girlfriend. “Should we trust him by himself?”

She nodded. “Let’s go somewhere. And not your house.”

They took off together. Probably made it no further than the convenience store and the beach across the way from it. Charlie stayed and watched. “Do you ever put graphics on your boards?”

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she asked. "I mean pictures. I know you have your name and some color panels."

"Not usually." I had already trued up my outline and got the bottom rocker pretty much how I wanted it. Time to cut the rail bands. But I put down my planer for the moment. "Nothing against it, though. Do you think you'd like to try it sometime?"

"What would I need?" She seemed to like the idea.

"When I was young we pretty much had to use colored resin on top of the fiberglass. That's because the glass wasn't as clear then. Now you can paint acrylics directly on the foam and they will show through okay."

"I have acrylic paints," Charlie said. She looked thoughtful — already thinking about what she could do with them?

"Good. My friend Pat mostly paints with acrylic."

"Really? I thought those were oil paintings."

"They fool lots of people. Anyway, think about a design you might like to try. Nothing complicated, flat areas of color preferably." I picked up the Skil. "And we won't experiment with Richie's new ride," I said before cranking it up.

To her credit, Charlie sat there and watched me run all the rails. Even I would have been bored. When I was done, she asked, "That's all the rough shaping now, isn't it? And you refine it from here?"

"Absolutely right. Time to turn off the power tools."

From there on it was sand paper and block planes, rounding the rails, adding a slight concave through the middle of the bottom, a bit of vee at the tail. "Now all I need to do is install the fins," I

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announced. "Richie wants the removable kind." I tended to prefer fins that were permanently glassed on myself.

"Three of them?" asked Charlie.

"That's right. This is really a pretty conservative board and not much different from the stock ones I crank out." I got down my router and jig to install the fin boxes. "This is one of the least fun parts," I told her, as I routed out the cavities. "Some guys like to do it during the glassing process." Some resin, push the fin boxes in, tape to hold them in place.

"Ready to glass, as soon as the boxes set up properly. If you were going to add art to the board, you would do it now." I gave the whole thing a last looking-over. "But Richie insisted on an absolutely clear board, not even color. I'm surprised he was willing to let me add my logo."

"Why are your own boards red, Shaper?"

"I don't much like red, really, but it shows up well if you lose your ride. A white board will disappear."

She grinned. "Everyone will know it is you in the water, too, won't they? Shaper is an exhibitionist!"

"There is that," I agreed.

"Maybe I need to be one and show you my pictures."

"Anytime, Charlie. Bring some over here or I'll look at them on Thursday." Thursday was Thanksgiving. I hadn't backed out of dinner, although I had been tempted. I guess the only legitimate way to get out of it would be to keel over dead.

Or if the surf that day was so fantastic that I just didn't care about anything else. One or the other could always happen.

Chapter 28

It was time for its baptism. Sing ‘we are gathered at the ocean,’ and let’s get on with it. Richie carried his new board down the steps and toward the water — I had insisted that he let it sit and cure for two days after I had finished glassing. It would simply make it stronger.

The last thing I would want to see is one of my boards snap on its first day because it had been ridden too soon.

Wednesday afternoon, the day before Thanksgiving. The waves were mediocre but I had promised to be at the pier with his new board when he got out of school. His sister had promised to pick him up at school so he could be there.

But Cathy had broken up with him so she would not be there. Knowing high school kids, they might break up and get back together several times over the next couple years.

It seemed to paddle well enough. One tiny thruster is much like another in that respect. I’ve ridden some even smaller boards in my time. The late Sixties were a great time for experimentation in surf boards. In lots of other things too, of course.

I had decided to make another board for my own use, even if it were a bit of an extravagance. A casual, everyday board, a little looser than Big Red, what some call a ‘fun board.’ And I would have Charlie do a design.

If I liked her work when I saw it. That was still a sizable ‘if.’

Richie had paddled or, more accurately, swam the board out to the break. Only had to duck-dive under a breaking wave the one time and had no problem with that. It was bulky boards that gave trouble there. And paddle into — no, you blew your take off, kid. It can take a while to wire that on a new board.

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Then he was into a decent little right. Don't be so cautious, Richie, even if it is a new board. He turned high and got ahead of the break, before throwing a bit of a slow-motion cutback. Snap back on the forehand, but there was no power left and the wave turned to soup in front of him. The next wave was better. And the one after.

"I think he likes it, Shaper," said Jan. We were leaning against the hood of my truck, watching. "It looks like fun. Should have brought my board."

"Me too," I agreed.

Her attention started to lag after a few minutes more. "I'll drive Richie home if you have someplace to go," I told her.

"I don't really. I'm afraid I'm just going to sit home tonight."

"Don't knock it. I do that every night. Are you eating dinner with your folks tomorrow?"

"Sure." She looked a bit introspective. "There may not be that many more family Thanksgiving dinners for me."

"Until you start a family of your own," I told her.

"Yeah. Good idea, Shaper. I think I'll do that."

"Don't let it get away from you." I probably sounded more wistful than I had intended.

"You should have come all those times we invited you."

"But you weren't serving macaroni and cheese!" We both giggled over that, I'll admit.

"I think I'll go," she announced. "Don't lose my brother." She took off in her smoke-gray Malibu, it's V-8 rumbling. They don't make 'em like that anymore and the planet is grateful.

SHAPER

It looked like Richie intended to stay a while so I wandered across the street to check out some of the stores. That included the *Blue Wave Surf Shop*, my competition. What 'blue wave' meant, I had no idea. Maybe the owners didn't either. Anyway, I was glad I had been first on the scene and had been able to take the *Cully Beach Surf Shop* name. When people looked for a surf shop in Cully Beach, there I was.

Lots of junk for tourists. Cheap production boards and, yes, some good ones too. And not one surfer in the place. They won't last. The monthly rent on this location was probably more than I grossed in the same time.

Next door. Juice bar. A smoothie would be nice, but not in my budget. Move on. There used to be a book store here, wasn't there? Now it's a coffee place, with outside tables. It wouldn't be a bad place to sit and watch the waves. If I wanted coffee.

There came Jim and Jay, our intrepid cycle cops, on the far side of A-1-A. Maybe their last sweep along the beach for the day. Is there a clock here somewhere?

Aw, who cares? The time is what the time is. I crossed the highway and ambled south along the boardwalk, past the pier. I hadn't walked out there in years. But the smell of the bait shop hadn't changed. Then back to my own truck, and a dripping Richie sitting on the hood. I wish he wouldn't do that. "Board stowed away?" I asked, though I could see it was in the bed.

"So what do you think?" I asked Richie once he was stowed away as well, on the seat beside me.

"It'll do," he replied. That was good enough for me.

Chapter 29

My morning jaunt had revealed that there were still some small waves rolling in, so I spent my morning up at the pier. Almost no one else was out on this Thanksgiving morning. I could have surfed by the motel but I thought it might be better to keep my distance until dinner time.

A few guests were at the *Easy Breezes*. More would probably be coming in tonight for the long weekend. Just a taste of how busy they would be over the next few months. On a whim, I pulled my white Toyota truck into their parking lot instead of going directly home. Or not really a whim, because I wanted a time confirmation.

Michelle was outside and came over. "Hi Michelle. What time do you want me to show up?"

"Aren't you already here?"

"No," I replied. "I'm somewhere else."

"Oh. When you get there, tell yourself to show up at Two."

"Will do!" We both snickered a bit. Easily amused, I guess.

"Surfing again, huh?"

"Yeah. I call it field testing of the product. Can I bring anything?"

"Do you have anything?"

"Not really, but I have three free hours to bake. I do a mean brownie."

"Kay claims otherwise. She says you specialize in bland and healthful. And I think *her* cooking is bland and healthful."

I shrugged. "I kind of like bland. Food, that is."

"I'm glad you qualified that!"

We chuckled again. "I have an idea. I'd better hurry home and start baking. Later!"

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Around the parking lot, back onto A-1-A, and straight to the kitchen. I could unload the truck and shower later. Focaccia! That was the thing. But I barely had time.

Hey, surfboards aren't the only thing I can make. While I waited on the first rising, I got myself cleaned up. I even shaved.

Punch it down. Knead. Let it rise again.

An aloha shirt. One of my collection or grab a new one out of the shop? Aloha shirts were sort of my equivalent to a tuxedo. Not the one with martini glasses on it.

All right. Into the oven!

I looked up at the clock. Enough time left. It was going to be too warm, maybe, but that wouldn't hurt anything. Ah, that smelled grand!

Out it comes and onto a towel. All ready? Okay, wrap it up and off we go.

What a dead day. Hardly any traffic. Don't see anything going on at the Bells' but I'm pretty certain there is a football game being watched somewhere in there. And over the highway and through the weeds, to the Jackson's house we go. Or their motel.

Where? The office? There was a living space connected to it, wasn't there?

I needn't have worried. The office door opened as I approached.

"Yellow!" said Charlie, taking a look at my rather bright shirt.

"And yellow to you too," I replied.

"And long pants. You're finally a grown-up."

"Don't be fooled by appearances. How you doing, Charlie?" She

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was in black. Charlie seemed to wear black quite a bit — we hadn't quite converted her into a surfer girl yet.

"Great! Come on in. That smells good. Mom!" she called. "He's here!"

"Is he sure this time?" asked Michelle as she came through a doorway behind the desk.

"I'm never completely sure," I admitted. "But it's likely."

"Bread?" She gave me a hug. Charlie sort of cocked her head and looked at us. I guess this was the first display of affection between us she had seen. I was glad she didn't scowl or something.

"Focaccia. It should be cool enough shortly."

"Oh, that's like a pizza but without any toppings, isn't it?" asked Charlie.

"Sounds bland," remarked Michelle and we both laughed. The girl, of course, wasn't in on the joke.

"Well, come on through the portal into our humble abode," said Charlie. The humble abode was a small apartment, one bedroom I assumed, a tiny open kitchen on one side of this living room area. About as much space as I had, in fact, if one didn't count my mostly unused spare bedroom. But there was only one of me.

And it was better than a motel room which was sort of what I had pictured them living in.

"Give it about half an hour," said Michelle, "and relax. Want the TV on?"

"Not for me," I replied. "I don't even own one. Anything I can help you with?" One should always ask, right?

"Nah, you'd just be underfoot. Men usually are." She reconsid-

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ered. "Or we'd be under each others feet. You have your ways of doing things." Of course I did. Who else would do them?

"Okay." I settled onto a sofa with a slightly ratty blue comforter thrown over it. Did one of them sleep here? Charlie plopped down beside me, a manila folder in her hands with various sizes of paper sticking out at various angles. I suspected that it held various pictures.

I *had* promised to look at them.

Some sucked. There, I said it. Some showed promise. Charlie certainly had the makings of a competent designer. Maybe not of an artist, but who is to say? Some would say that I'm one, though I claim to be no more than a craftsman.

One thing I would say about her work and I said it to her right then. "You should pursue this. You should take classes." She might end up as no more than a layout artist for some printer but that was an honest job. Better than having nothing.

I considered her work some more. With a little direction, maybe, she might be able to do something with a surfboard. "Okay. I'm willing to let you try your hand on one of my boards. If it works out, maybe more. How about I, um, deduct a month's payment from what you owe every time you do one?"

"Two months," stated Michelle. "Don't try to cheat my daughter."

"Okay, okay. Your agent is a tough negotiator, kid."

"But a good cook," claimed Charlie. "Is it ready yet, Mom?"

Chapter 30

I couldn't expect the Jackson women to go vegetarian themselves for my sake. Not on Thanksgiving. There was some chicken, shake-and-bake style, along with the macaroni.

"We wouldn't have bought a turkey just for the two of us, anyway," said Michelle. "I'm not sure we would have bothered with Thanksgiving dinner at all if you hadn't come."

"I'm happy to have saved the holiday for you." Were they the sort to say grace? Michelle didn't seem religious. As far as Charlie goes, kids that age can put beliefs on and off as quickly as they change their clothes.

No, we dug right in. And the mac and cheese really was quite good. I could tell there was mustard in there. So were the slices of focaccia, if I do say so myself. But admittedly bland.

No sooner had we started than a bell rang. "Someone in the office," said Charlie. "I'll get it."

While we waited, I told Michelle, "You two are going to be very busy for the next couple months. It might start to slow down a little in February."

"And quite a bit by April. I've seen the books for the previous years. When things do get slower we can start some revamping of the place. Painting and repairs and maybe replace some of the old furniture."

"I think you should start with the painting in here." The walls were an ugly pinkish beige.

"It is hideous, isn't it? But our own apartment has low priority." She poked at a drumstick with her fork. "Oh, what the heck," she

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said, picking it up to gnaw the meat from the bone. “I like the colors in your place. Restful. Maybe I should do the rooms in that shade.”

I had painted my kitchen — the only room she had seen — a pale spring green. Charlie came back. “Nothing important. Just wanted some extra towels. I hope this is still warm,” she said as she sat herself down. “Did you two behave while I was gone?”

“If you don’t count that passionate encounter under the table.” Michelle chuckled and glanced at me. “Oh, I made Ted blush.” She looked like she was going to laugh and then thought better of it. “Sorry, Ted. My mouth tends to work faster than my brain sometimes.”

“It’s okay.” I had recovered — she’d kind of ambushed me — and was ready to counter. “But maybe we shouldn’t admit to such goings-on in front of your innocent daughter.”

Michelle turned her eyes toward that daughter and spoke seriously. “You don’t have any problems with — with where life is taking us, do you, Charlotte?”

“No, Mom. Hey, I love Dad but I understand.” She looked from one of us to the other. “It’s time to push the reset button.”

I suspected they were both taking a bit granted about me. But I wasn’t about to yell out, ‘I’m just a friend!’ Nor even bolt for the door.

Dessert proved to be a lime pie, a purchased one, straight from the *Winn-Dixie*. It said ‘key lime’ on it but I knew it was probably made with the regular ones. Maybe a key lime had rolled past it on the table at some point. None the less, it was pretty good, though I

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am not fond of graham cracker crusts and even less of aluminum pie plates. I don't completely trust them not to be poisoning me.

As I helped clean up after, I noted a long envelope lying on the counter, embossed with *Salidar, Hainsworth and Peters, PA*. A legal firm. Michelle noted me noting it. It hadn't been hidden; maybe she had even wanted me to see it.

"Yes, my divorce papers. I consider myself divorced. It's just not official yet," she said. I understood that. Legalities could lag behind life. "I'm even paying for it all," she went on.

"And you can't get Bradley to sign off, right?"

She turned from the sink and stared at me. "You know his name?"

Ooh. "I could say Charlie mentioned it," I said, glancing toward the girl. She probably would have backed me up. "But the truth is that the police chief is my friend so I've heard lots of things. He's, um, interested in your former husband."

"Why? That doesn't make any sense."

Charlie broke in. "Yes it does, Mom." She gulped and continued. "The guy they found dead over there, the OD." She nodded in the general direction of my shop. "It was Vern."

"Vern Dorrance?" Michelle suddenly understood. "Then your father —"

"Yeah."

"I wish you'd told me sooner, Charlotte." I didn't blame the girl one bit for keeping it quiet. I would've done the same in her place. Which does not mean it was the right thing to do. Michelle turned

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to me. "I'm sorry you were dragged into this, Ted. I'm sorry our troubles followed us up here."

"Stuff happens." Should I say anything more? Yes, this was the right time to unburden. "I know more than you realize — we should talk about it sometime. But not now. Not today. Let's get the dishwasher loaded and enjoy ourselves." I looked across the room. "Can you play that guitar?" I'd been wondering about it every since I had arrived.

"She used to," Charlie said. "Do you play, Shaper?"

"I used to."

Chapter 31

Michelle and I had both been pretty rusty. It didn't matter. She knew mostly old soft rock songs. I knew mostly folk songs. She sang dreadfully. I think I am actually pretty good.

And I headed home around sunset. People were checking in and interrupting our fun. That's how it goes when you run a business. Mine included.

We embraced before I went out the office door. Only a brush of lip on cheek this time. Had things changed? Did she think I had been misleading her, deceiving her even? Or maybe Michelle just had a lot on her mind.

As I had on mine as I walked home. I heard music coming through the high hedge along the south side of my property when I arrived. Classic rock. Who occupied the house there now? It was an old wooden cottage, set back among the trees so one could barely see it, and predated the concrete block houses like my own.

There had been a electronics repair guy in there the last time I had noticed. Computers and stuff. Maybe I should have a computer. Kay felt they were just a fad, but that didn't keep her kids from having and using one. And I had noticed one in the motel office. I guess they were about everywhere now.

Maybe one would be useful for inventory. I'd walk over there sometime and see if they had something used. If the same business was still there.

Not until next week. It would be a busy weekend, I was sure. Thanksgiving was the signal for many snow birds to migrate south. More would wait until Christmas, with flocks appearing through

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December. The Cully Beach population would swell considerably when all of them arrived.

I sat in my kitchen for a while, at loose ends. That green was restful, wasn't it? Maybe I should just get in bed with a book. It was only about two hours to my regular bedtime anyway. But it's a holiday — a glass of wine first. Still some zinfandel left. No, there's an unopened chenin blanc in the back of the fridge.

I uncorked it and poured out about three ounces. That was what I usually allowed myself. Not bad, for kind of cheap stuff. Leaving it on the table after a sip, I went up front, into the shop, and stared out the front window. The sign was lit up at the *Easy Breezes*, 'vacancy' flashing on and off. All the rooms must not have been reserved then. Or they had just forgotten to turn it off.

Don't let the wine get warm. I settled back at the kitchen table and leafed through an old copy of *Surfer*. A minute later I tossed it aside.

What was I doing? I felt like I was drowning, as surely as when I had wiped out a few weeks ago. And I didn't know how to swim to shore here.

Kind of a stupid analogy, I told myself. These are people. I can't depend on my own will.

I held my empty wine glass, turning it around in my fingers. This had come from my parents. A lot of my kitchenware had. No one else had wanted it. Molded to look like cut glass. That made it less likely to slip out of my hand. Useful enough but pretty much junk otherwise.

Still only Seven-thirty. I went out the back and flipped the lights

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on in my shaping room. Why not get started on that new board? The one I was going to let Charlie have a go at. If she messed up, opaque resin could cover a multitude of sins, hers included. I shouldn't do this when I've had something to drink. But that was wearing off already.

I could work at night in this weather. A month ago, my work space would have filled with flying insects if I'd had the door up. Then I lost myself for a couple hours. By the time I went inside it was well past my normal bedtime.

And I had managed to find the shore. At least for now.

Chapter 32

“Are you avoiding Michelle?” asked Kay.

“Not really. We’ve both been busy.”

She clearly did not buy it.

“Don’t let her get away,” advised Rick. “You need a woman, Ted.”

“I’m just waiting for the perfect one — a literary, vegetarian, surfer girl.”

It sounded lame even to me but Rick nodded sagely. “Well, I understand that. I decided to skip the first marriage and go straight to the trophy wife.” He winked at his Kay.

Who would have none of this. “You’ll be waiting forever, then,” she snapped at me. Kay rarely became agitated but when she did it was best to stay out of her way.

“I’ve kind of expected to,” I answered.

Kay didn’t have a ready response but would surely have come up with one, given a moment. Fortunately, Richie came in the back door just then.

“Hey, man,” I said. “Have you considered my job offer?”

“Yeah, sure Mr. Carrol.” He sounded way less than enthusiastic.

“One afternoon a week will pretty much cover the payments you owe me,” I reminded him.

“Richard is dejected,” Rick informed me. “Girl trouble.” The kid gave him a ‘mind-your-own-business-Dad’ look. “I remember how it was, son,” he continued. “I had my heartbreaks when I was your age.”

This was nothing that Richie wanted to hear. “How ’bout you, Ted? Did some girl scar you for life?” asked Rick.

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"I didn't date when I a teen. Or even talk to girls."

"You were that shy?" wondered Kay.

"Crippling social anxiety would be a better description," I replied. "It took me a while to grow out of it." I knew the Bells were thinking that I hadn't grown out of it, not completely. And they would be right. "Or to train myself out of it, in truth," I added.

"How?" asked Richie.

"By performing. Getting on stage and singing and learning to put on a role. Being someone else, in other words."

He asked a rather obvious question. "Are you someone else right now?"

I laughed. "Don't know. I can't keep track of the multiple personalities anymore."

"As long as one of them pays me," he decided, and headed upstairs.

"And one of them needs to talk to Michelle Jackson," said Kay, returning to her original subject. She wasn't one to give up.

"I'll send one over," I quipped. "No, seriously, I'm not hiding from her. But she is pretty busy right now. It's not easy for just the two of them to run that motel."

I had promised to discuss the things I knew with her. I was certain Michelle would call that one in soon.

"I know," sighed Kay. "I was over talking with her this morning. I had to follow her around as she worked to have a conversation." I'll bet Michelle enjoyed that, I thought. Someone else to get underfoot.

"And the festival is almost here," Rick reminded us. "Are you going to have a booth, Ted?"

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“No. I only did that the one time.” At one of the earlier festivals, I had taken a space and displayed some boards. Pretty much a waste of time. “I am sort of involved in the planning. You see, Kay, I am busy too.” I stood up. “Must be after Four. I shouldn’t be away from the shop any longer.”

“Who is there today? Joan?”

“No, Lisa. She’s actually working out okay. But I’ve left her alone for almost half an hour and that is taking a bit of a chance.”

I headed south, cutting through the backyards once again. I had left Lisa in charge almost as soon as she had walked in the front door, dropped there by the school bus. I’d felt a need to get out of the shop for a while and I had seen that Rick’s truck was parked at home. Maybe if I’d known what was on Kay’s mind, I wouldn’t have gone.

Inside the shop, Charlie was leaning against the counter, talking to my young employee. “Hi, Shaper,” she greeted me. “I’m taking a break from cleaning rooms for a few minutes.” I hadn’t been the only escapee this afternoon.

I nodded and asked Lisa. “Everything okay here?”

“Yes, Shaper. I sold some earrings!” Had I ever let her ring up a sale on her own before? I’d have to check later but I had a feeling she’d done the job correctly.

“Come with me, Charlie,” I said and went back out the door. She followed me to my shaping room. “Here’s your canvas,” I told her, holding up my freshly-shaped personal board. “But I want to see it on paper first.”

She gave it a good look. “No hurry,” I added. “How’s your mom?”

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“You should ask her yourself.”

“She’s not here. That’s why I’m asking you.” I hardly ever display any temper, even a little bit, but I’d had a bit too much of that already. Charlie looked surprised. I shook my head. “Sorry. I’m grumpy today.”

“Better than being Sneezzy,” she replied. “But I’m used to you being Mr. Self-control, Shaper.” Ah, the kid knew me already. “Mom is okay. Working hard.”

“So I figured. Do you — do you think I should go over?” What? Asking this kid for advice?

She quite seriously pondered this and answered, “No. But I’ll tell her you said ‘hi.’ Really,” she continued, “we do have too much to do for any serious talk right now.”

“You are wise beyond your years, young one,” I told her.

“And wise between my ears. I’ll bring something over in a day or two. And maybe Mom, too.”

Chapter 33

I walked past my own place on my return from the beach that morning and paused in front of the house to the south of mine. There was no longer any sort of business sign out front. The electronics guy — or gal, I didn't really know — must have moved on.

But someone was living there. I had heard their music and a porch light shone now through the bushes that concealed most of the front. Okay. Then I didn't have an excuse to visit here and wasn't all that curious, anyway. I turned around and went back to my place.

The coffee was ready. Decent coffee, my usual brand, though I sometimes got a better Colombian when I felt like spoiling myself or guests. In fact, this was what my grandmother had drank pretty much every morning of her adult life. Grandma was full of opinions about what was best, all four-foot-eleven of her.

I should pick up some of that better coffee before Pat and his wife arrived. I got up and added it to the list on the front of my refrigerator. Anything else as long as I'm standing here? I couldn't think of anything. Probably will as soon as I sit down, I told myself.

Ha, I should have brought the list over to the table with me. Inefficient, Ted! What now? No surf today. Rain moving in later, said the radio. That could mean the waves would be coming up.

I went into the spare bedroom. There it was. I pulled out my guitar, a classical, and began to tune it up. Once, I had a bunch of instruments but had sold most to help finance this place. That was, once again, giving up one thing to get another.

Would I ever be willing to give up the things I had right now?

I finger-picked my way through *The House of the Rising Sun*. The

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chords, not the tune. I even remembered the little solo I had made up for it and was not too ragged in its playing. My voice was pretty nonexistent at that time of the morning, though.

There was a meeting today, I remembered. I'm no big civic booster but I was a Cully Beach businessman and took part in my own way. When I felt like it. Of course, a lot of the guys saw me as a terrible obstructionist to their plans. I liked to see myself as a voice for the little businesses like Kay's, even while I recognized that was the losing side in this town. In Florida, in general. Shoot, maybe in the whole world.

But this was for the Snow Bird Festival. That was something we could all pretty much agree on. 'Let us warm you up' was our slogan. It wasn't a very good one, but no one had come up with anything better and it did fit in with the chili cook-off. The idea was to welcome the returning residents and tourists at the beginning of the season. Usually on the first weekend in December, but that came so early this year it had been moved to the next one.

Our meeting was a while yet. Actually at the same time I would open the surf shop more days than not. This would be a 'not' day.

I would challenge you to have picked the surfer out of the businessmen when we did come together that morning. In a polo shirt and khakis, I blended right in. Well, yeah, the canvas boat shoes might have given me away — I try not to wear leather for the same reasons I don't eat meat. And I didn't even have the longest hair.

The half-dozen of us were walking the festival area, making sure of the logistics. Not the chili cook-off space, north of the pier, nor the entertainments. Those were different committees. We were

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concerned with the vendors and the art show in the two blocks south of the pier. "Someone should renew these markers," said Doris Boone, referring to the spray-painted lines and numbers on the curb. "Any volunteers?" I knew there wouldn't be so I said, "I'll take care of it." I would not mind getting out here in the early morning with a spray can, while the rest of them were still abed.

And by taking this job, I wouldn't have to worry about ending up with some other, less convenient task. But I supposed I would have to pay for the paint myself.

"Are you going to help check artists in, Ted?" asked Doris, as we broke up.

"Sure." Better them than the food vendors. "But you know I can't hang around past mid-morning. Have to open up my own place."

She nodded. Mrs. Boone might work at a bank but she knew shopkeepers had their own needs. "It's too bad we can't extend the celebration down as far as your place."

"That would be another four blocks." I winked. "Maybe we should start our own festival down there."

I was joking. Really. But darned if Doris didn't cock her gray-haired head at me and say, "That's not a bad idea at all. Maybe in the spring." Then she winked back and said, "Let me know if you need an organizer."

I could only hope that she would forget I'd ever mentioned the idea.

Chapter 34

Charlie's picture was a stylized portrait of her mom. I was surprised by how good it was. Obviously done from a blown-up photograph but there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

"You couldn't find a picture of her in a bikini?" asked Richie, looking over our shoulders. It was his first day on the job. He had been only a little late.

"I didn't want to get Shaper too excited," replied Charlie. "Though we have some at home if he'd like to see them."

"If the woman herself is at home I wouldn't need a picture." But not in a bikini, I reminded myself, and wondered briefly how Michelle might look so attired. Kind of scrawny, probably.

"It might not be that easy to transfer to the board."

"It has your approval, then?" she asked.

"Sure. But does it have your mom's approval?" I wouldn't want to embarrass her.

"Oh, she doesn't mind. Do I paint directly on the foam?"

"Hmm, yes, directly, but don't use a hard pencil to draw it. You don't want to press into that soft surface."

"What board is this for?" Richie asked.

"New one for myself," I told him. "A fun board."

Charlie spoke. "You called it an 'egg,' didn't you?"

"Yeah. Six-eight," I said, directing this toward Richie, "with a good deep vee at the tail."

"But only one fin, I'll bet."

"Of course." I turned back to Charlie. "Want to work here or take the board home?"

"Here, definitely. I need an excuse to be away from the motel!"

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“Okay. Mind the store, Richie.” He had hung around often enough that he knew how things worked. I motioned for Charlie to follow me back to my workshop. “The glassing room is probably best for this. Do you prefer to work flat or on an angle?”

She wasn’t sure. “I did it on the floor at home.”

“You can do that here if you prefer. Or up on the racks. I’ll leave the board in here and you can come and work when you want.” I set the shaped blank down on one of the glassing racks and nodded toward the side door. “I won’t lock that up until late. You know,” I said, a thought having just come to me, “you can work over here any time you want on your own stuff. There isn’t much room to spread out at home, I imagine.”

“Wow, thanks Shaper.” The girl hugged me and practically ran out the door. Off to get her paints, I reckoned.

But she didn’t return. Instead, her mother showed up about an hour later. “Charlie will bring her paints over later,” she told me. “Thank you for letting her do this.”

“Glad to.”

“I’m sure you are, Ted. I’ve figured out what a softy you are.” She gave the too-obviously interested Richie a glance and said, “Let’s go talk somewhere.”

So it was time for that. We passed from the shop into my kitchen. “Coffee?” I offered. “Or tea?” I was more inclined to have the latter this late in the day.

“Tea? No one has offered me a cup of tea in ages.”

“I’ll remedy that.” I put on a kettle. Hmm, Michelle was unlikely to be a green tea drinker. I put that aside. Darjeeling? Yeah, that

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would work. And the big tea pot. I never needed that for my cup-at-a-time tea drinking. I had barely scooped the tea leaves in before the kettle was whistling. I'm sure Michelle was entertained by the whole show.

"Loose tea?" she asked. "Isn't that kind of finicky?" She wasn't criticizing, of course, just giving me a little barb.

"Not once you are used to it. Though I have to admit, I'm not used to making this much at a time. Give it a couple minutes more to steep."

I set a plate down in the middle of the table. "In the meantime, here are some of my bland and healthful brownies."

She picked one up and nibbled it. "Nah, these taste too good to be healthful. Though they aren't real sweet, are they?"

"Dark chocolate is good for you. And I sweeten them with prune juice." She sniffed at the half of a brownie she held, shrugged and finished it.

"Tea is ready." I poured us each a cup. "Now, what do you want to hear first?"

Michelle took a sip before saying, "You decide where to start, Ted, and we'll take it from there."

So, first, I gave her the complete story of Vernon Dorrance and his overdose. Or as much as I knew. Most of it was familiar to Michelle.

Then I had to tell the tale of Charlie's sponsor. We both had a chuckle over that. "So Janice is in on this?" she asked.

"Some."

"Good. Charlie needs a friend she can talk with."

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Finally, I had to ask the big question. “Do you know a Ray Manuel?”

She drew in her breath at that. “How is he involved?”

“I identified him as a man hanging around your place a while ago. I know he is dangerous.”

“Yes, dangerous. You could call him that. He was here?”

“He was. On the beach by the motel.”

She got up. “I have to go home. I don’t want Charlie alone over there.”

“This was weeks ago. He’s probably gone.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Out the back door she went, and hurried toward the *Easy Breezes*, cutting across the lawn next door.

“Wow, Shaper,” said Richie when I went back into the shop. “What’s with Mrs. Jackson?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “but I think I will have to go over to the motel and find out.”

Chapter 35

“I over-reacted, I guess. Panicked. But it was that name!” Michelle shook her head.

“Would you like me to say something to Chief Cotton about it?”

She shrugged. “I doubt it would make any difference but if you want to, Ted, go ahead. I have nothing to hide from the police.”

“You might know something they don’t. Bill — the chief, that is — said they didn’t know of any connection between this Manuel and your, um, ex-husband.” We were sitting out by the pool, beyond Charlie’s hearing. She only knew that her mother had come home upset and hugged her so hard she couldn’t breathe.

“Oh, there is.” She looked beyond me a moment, out toward the highway. She had been crying, hadn’t she? And trying not to, now. “But it’s Charlie, mostly. Ray used to supply her and her friends. Ecstasy, sometimes other drugs. That’s how he eventually hooked up with Brad. I’m pretty sure he sold him drugs, too.”

“Heroin?” It was a guess but I thought it likely.

“Yes, heroin. Brad’s been an on-again, off-again junkie for years. Could I have Charlie around that? And I didn’t like the way that man looked at Charlie. Not ever. He never did anything, thank god, maybe because of her father.

“It was the final straw and my back was too broken to ever mend. That’s when I filed for divorce and got us out of there.”

What could I say? Nothing I figured, so I just took her hand and we sat there a while.

“I wish,” whispered Michelle. “I wish I’d met a man who made prune-juice brownies years ago.”

I smiled. “That’s me, kid, bland and healthful.”

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“At least Bradley was never abusive. Except to himself. He was a good man, once, Ted, and he took me and Charlie in when we had no one. That’s why I stuck by him for so long.”

“If you don’t feel safe here, remember that I have a spare bedroom.”

“Oh, Ted, that’s good of you. But I know we are about as safe here as anywhere else.” She gave me a crooked smile. “As long as we lock the doors. And how can we ever make a go of it if we run and hide?”

“Okay, I understand that. But remember that it is there. If you’re ever concerned about Charlie, send her over.”

“I might do that.” She seemed to be going over all of this in her mind. “I mostly don’t like the idea of leaving her here alone.” A pause to further gather her thoughts. “Or wandering around late by herself. Which she would have been doing if she went over there to paint.”

“I promise to walk her back if it is late. It might not hurt if I let the Bells in on some of this. They are right across the road, after all.”

“So is a convenience store,” laughed Michelle. “And probably an easier place to find help. But sure, tell them what you want.”

I chuckled. She had a point. “Speaking of Bells, Richie probably wonders what happened to me. It’s past time to lock up.”

“He’s probably waiting for your report. The boy seems pretty interested in our goings-on.”

“Oh, well, you know he has a bit of a crush on Charlie.”

“Does he now? I probably should notice things like that but quite honestly, Ted, I’m a dummy when it comes to guys.”

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“No worse than I am with women, Michelle. I’d better run. Be careful and do lock those doors.”

We embraced rather a long time. Maybe neither wanted to stop. “Charlie probably wonders if we are ever going to kiss,” whispered Michelle.

“Let’s make her wonder a little longer,” I whispered back. But our lips did come together eventually.

Richie was, indeed, waiting. And he was anxious to hear what happened. The kid was as keen for gossip as his mother.

To whom I wished to speak. After closing up, the both of us walked over to his house, and I laid out much of what I knew to Kay and Rick.

“You’ve been keeping all of this from us, Ted? And Jan’s in on it too?” Kay was a little miffed, maybe, but mostly just surprised.

“Oh, Jan never had many details, but she did know there were things going on.”

“I’m getting my shotgun out,” declared Rick.

“Don’t be an idiot,” his wife told him. I was inclined to agree with both of them, some. And I might be an advocate of nonviolence, but there was a .38 in my bedroom, just in case someone who wasn’t tried breaking in.

“I think I’m going to talk to Bill Cotton tomorrow,” I told them, “but I want to be unobtrusive about it. If I ask him to have lunch or something, he’ll know what’s up.” Then something unrelated popped into my mind. “Hey, do you all know who is living in the house on my south side now?”

Both shook their heads. “That computer person moved out a

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couple months ago,” said Kay. “I know the place was for rent but I thought it was still empty.”

“Apparently not. Maybe someone seasonal took it.”

“Your police chief friend would know,” remarked Rick. Old hippie that he was, Rick did not completely approve of my hanging about with police and businessmen. But he had a good point. Bill would be able to find out who was over there.

I would just need to tell him that they seemed suspicious!

Chapter 36

I did catch Bill Cotton the next morning and filled him in as we drank coffee by A-1-A, sitting at one of the white-painted metal tables — aluminum, I was sure but intended to look like wrought iron — across the highway from the beach. He mostly just nodded at the stuff I told him.

But he did promise to have patrols check out the motel more frequently. “I suspect that Bradley Jackson will make contact with his wife sooner or later,” he told me. “Knowing the connection with this Manuel character may be helpful.”

Bill was evasive about the house to my south. I think maybe he knew something he didn’t want to tell me. “I’ll look into it,” was all he said. Then we gabbed some about the festival, since we were sitting at ground-zero for it.

“Your bicycle patrol is going to be kept busy,” I remarked.

“I’m putting Blake back on a bike for the weekend, so we can have three guys. Stagger their shifts a bit.”

“Good idea. By the way, tell your men not to arrest me for vandalism when I’m out here spray painting the sidewalk next week.”

I sat and watched the waves for a short while after he left. Rideable, but I felt I should be back at my place. And I didn’t have a board with me. An unattended board in a truck bed is just too much of a temptation for some people so I didn’t toss one in this morning.

I turned down the road next to the motel and looked at the surf there, as well. I could come over here and surf and maybe keep an eye on things at the same time. But no, it was already nearly Ten and I might as well open the shop. I noticed Charlie as I got the

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truck turned around and gave her a wave before pulling back out on the highway.

This was Wednesday. Jan would be coming in, and fairly early. I'd have most of the afternoon to work, if I wanted. Work on what? I didn't know.

Janice Bell came in a little before One with Charlie, like the first day I met her, in tow. I could guess that Charlie's tote contained her art supplies.

"We've been in conference with Charlie's mom," said Jan. "I think we're up to date on what's been going on now."

"Mom put me in Jan's custody," giggled Charlie.

"You could do worse," I told her. "Jan can be a real mother hen."

Miss Bell wasn't sure whether or not this was a compliment. And I wondered if the briefing had included anything about Ray Manuel. Michelle might have preferred not to mention him to her daughter.

We talked for a while in the showroom, while Jan and I puttered about with cleaning and sorting and dealing with a couple customers who wandered in, Charlie sitting cross-legged on the floor. Mostly the girls talked. I was about to leave them and head back to my work rooms when the subject turned to Charlie's past.

"Dad moved us to Orlando when I was still little" she said. "Nine, I think. He'd lost his job in Lauderdale and thought maybe he could get work at Disney or somewhere. Orlando was supposed to be booming.

"But he mostly stayed unemployed and got into trouble. I don't know if he used drugs before but it became pretty obvious then. He would clean up for a while and then fall back into it."

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“He went to jail, didn’t he?” As soon as I asked I thought maybe I shouldn’t have. But Charlie seemed to take it as just matter of course.

“That was earlier, while we were still in Fort Lauderdale. He got in with the wrong people. Dad seemed to do that a lot.”

Janice was wide-eyed. It was one thing to read about this sort of thing or see it on television but quite another to have your friend telling you how she lived it. Smart and self-assured as Jan was, her life had been pretty sheltered.

“In Orlando, I started drinking. I was like thirteen when I had my first drink. All I wanted to do was party and drink with my friends. I cut school a lot or went stoned and ended up in juvenile court a bunch of times. They said they would take me away from Mom but never did. I guess they had too many other kids to worry about.

“And guys. It’s just luck I didn’t get pregnant. Honestly, if Mom hadn’t gotten me out of there I might be on the street doing it for money.”

“Why did you do this?” whispered Jan, who had sat herself down beside her friend. “Did it make you happy?”

“No. It only helped me forget I was unhappy for a while.”

I knew what she meant. I doubt that Jan, a happy kid most of the time, did. And Charlie seemed to recognize that. “Hey, I’ve brought you down enough. Why don’t I go get started on that board?” She looked at me. “That okay with you, Shaper?”

“Sure. It’s unlocked. Let me know if you need anything.” Charlie disappeared with her bag.

Jan continued her chores. I went to the counter and started going

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through the receipts. I had let those pile up a bit. We didn't say anything to each other for half an hour.

Enough staring at paper. The numbers were starting to make no sense to me. I took off my glasses and said, "You're in charge, Jan," and stepped out the back door. The door into my kitchen, that is. I had to pass through it go outside.

I decided to go back and check on Charlie's progress. She was standing in the doorway to the glassing bay, a cigarette in hand. I snatched it from her and stamped it out. "Don't do that!"

"Hey!" She looked both surprised and offended. "My mom sneaks smokes too. But we both hide it from each other."

"But not around volatile chemicals. Never light up back here!"

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, Shaper. I'm such a fuck-up." She started to tear up.

"It's my fault. I should have warned you." I knew this was absolutely true, even if there was a 'no smoking' sign. You have to think things through.

Charlie put her arms around me. "I won't mess up. I promise." I awkwardly returned the hug.

"How's the work going?" I asked.

She shrugged. Not a good sign. "You'll get it right, kid. Want me to look at it?"

"Wait until I've done more, okay?"

"Sure. I'll be next door." There was a pass-through between the two work rooms, but I rarely used it. I went around the building and into my shaping bay. A stack of new blanks waited in the middle of the room. The supply house in Cocoa would deliver a half-dozen or

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so at a time when I called them, along with resin or whatever else I might need. They had a regular route of surf shops and board builders they serviced.

Sometimes I went down and picked them out myself, but it's not a short drive — pretty much have to make a day of it — and I'd been too busy lately. That was the excuse I gave myself, anyway. These had come in late yesterday. I should get them up into the storage racks, out of my way. Always putting things into their proper places, wasn't I?

Chapter 37

As promised, I walked Charlie home. Jan had left nearly an hour earlier, going back to talk with her friend as I closed up, and then heading on to her own house. Wouldn't her finals be in a couple weeks? Hmm, or three, maybe. Jan would be halfway through her second year at college. It seemed unbelievable.

Charlie finally got her drawing the way she wanted it and was filling in colors. There was a bit of a mess around the artwork, thanks to too many erasures. I think that was what had been bothering her before.

"Not a problem, Charlie," I had told her. "A bit of white paint will hide those." Or maybe something a little darker, I added to myself. Might cover better.

"And people say not to cover up your mistakes!"

"Those people aren't artists."

It was pretty dark out. That time of year. "You're leaving your paints?" I asked as I closed and locked behind us.

"Yeah, Shaper. All I need is, like, paper and pencils at home. I'll paint over here like you said, if that — it's still okay with you, isn't it?"

"Absolutely." I wondered why she was asking.

We started north, up the sidewalk. "I know something important went down between you and Mom but she wouldn't fill me in. She seems awful worried." She frowned. "Even scared, maybe."

So Michelle did not mention Ray Manuel to her. "Take care of her, will you?"

Me? Yeah, of course me. "I'll try," I promised.

"You should stay the night," she announced.

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Whoa, girl! "It's not, um, the time for that yet," I stammered. If ever.

"Why not? Mom wants it." I think I knew that.

"Your mother is still married." Was that just an excuse?

"Oh." Maybe she bought it. "Okay, Shaper. But I bet you two won't wait for the divorce to be final."

For that, I had no answer. She could be right but I needed more time to figure things out.

Not many guests at the motel, two cars down at the east end.

There was a man, a lanky guy with shoulder-length hair, sitting on a chair outside the office, beneath the single yellow light bulb that burnt by that door every night.

"Dad!"

Well, I most definitely would not stay the night.

Bradley Jackson hugged his step-daughter fiercely before turning a suspicious eye toward me.

"That's my boss," Charlie told him, which was sort of true. "Mr. Carrol. Making sure I got home safe." We gingerly shook hands. "Does Mom know you're here?"

"She wouldn't let me in until you got here. And him." He nodded his head in my direction. I should have checked the answering machine before we left. Michelle had undoubtedly been calling us.

The office door was locked. "I didn't take a key with me," murmured Charlie. She rang the service bell and Michelle's face appeared at the window a moment later.

She opened the door to us. "Only in the office, Brad," she said. "Over there." The two of them went to sit on the vinyl couch on the

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far side of the room and talked in low voices for a while. Charlie and I weren't sure what to do with ourselves.

"They'll be okay," she whispered eventually. "Let's go in and get a snack or something."

But the estranged couple rose and came to us. "You're sure of this, Shell?" the man asked. I suspected he had asked it more than once.

"I am, Brad. We both know it's been long over."

He had been resigned to this for a long time, no doubt, but I didn't blame him for making one more try. "Okay. I'll sign. Where are the papers?"

"Not now. It would have to be notarized."

"Kay can do that," I told them. "Would you like me to call her?"

Michelle hesitated a moment and then nodded. I'm sure she didn't want to bother Kay at this hour but did want to get this over with. I rang up the Bell's house. Richie answered. Probably expecting his girlfriend, whoever that might be on this particular day.

I could hear him call, "Mom. Mr. Carrol wants to talk to you!"

A moment to explain. "She'll be right over," I announced.

"Charlotte, will you go get the envelope on the counter?" asked Michelle.

"Is she doing okay?" asked Brad as soon as the girl left.

"Better than she has in years," her mother replied. "If you can get cleaned up, you can still be a part of her life, you know."

He only nodded. I think all three of us knew it was unlikely to happen. "Your boyfriend?" he abruptly asked, looking toward me.

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“My friend,” she replied.

“Um-huh. Charlie works for you?” he asked me.

“Part-time. I have a shop across the road.” Again, sort of true. And here was Kay.

Bradley took the pen Michelle handed him, leaned over the counter, his long arms poking out of a faded cowboy shirt, and scrawled his signature. Kay witnessed it and added her seal. “Take this to the post office first thing in the morning,” she advised.

“I intend to,” replied Michelle. “You’d better say goodbye to your dad, Charlie.”

The two embraced, father and daughter. Blood related or not, I could tell Bradley cared for her. Then he and I stepped out into the parking lot, leaving the women. I had no doubt that Kay would want to talk with them for a while.

The man sighed. It was a big deal. I recognized that.

“You have a place to stay?” I asked him.

“I know some guys.” We each went our separate way into the night.

Chapter 38

“You should have some flowers out here,” said Kay, surveying my ragged front lawn.

“Oh, I was thinking of paving it over for more parking.”

“You know that zoning would never let you get away with that. And you would be the first one to complain if someone else did it.”

All true. “Too many kids tramp across this,” I said. “Flowers would be flattened in no time. But more bushes, maybe. If only the hibiscus could hold up to the cold here.” We were just a little too far north for the tropical blooms I had known as a kid, down in southern Florida.

“You could plant the Rose of Sharon kind,” offered Michelle. “They’re hardy.”

“There you go,” Kay said, as though it were all decided. “You need to go right over to Joy and Susie’s place and buy some.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t going to disagree with Kay, even though it was the wrong time of year to be planting anything. “What brings two lovely ladies to my shop this morning? Before opening time, I might point out.”

“We just came from the post office,” replied Michelle. “I was sending out some registered mail.” No need asking what that might be. I knew it would take a couple more weeks for everything to be legal but Bradley Jackson’s signature had provided a kind of finality, hadn’t it?

“I wonder if I should go back to my maiden name,” Michelle continued. “Sandor.”

“More trouble than it’s worth, I would think,” was Kay’s opinion. “Especially if you might be changing it again later.”

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Neither Michelle nor I was going to touch that with any length of pole.

“Want to come in?” I asked.

The two looked at each other and shook their heads simultaneously. “We came to invite you to a party,” said Michelle.

“At my place, next Saturday. The festival weekend,” Kay clarified, so I wouldn’t think she meant two days from now. “Backyard, if the weather is nice.”

“And your artist friend is welcome,” added Michelle.

“Great. Now I won’t have to take him and Betty out for dinner.” I gave my yard another look. It was a rather small expanse, actually, as these old houses were built close to the road in the first place and said road had been widened since. “Maybe some more yuccas,” I said.

“They’re ugly, Ted,” Kay told me.

“Yucca-y,” added Michelle, who apparently had never met a pun she didn’t like.

“But a burglar deterrent when they’re planted below the windows.”

“When has anyone ever robbed you, Ted?” asked Kay. “I don’t remember that ever happening around here.”

“First year I was here,” I said. “It took a while for me to learn to be more careful.”

“Looks like you need to tend to customers,” she said. A Buick had pulled up out front and two older couples were getting out of it. “I don’t think they’re surfers.”

“It’s never too late to learn,” I informed her, and went inside.

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Charlie hurried over almost as soon as her mother got back to the motel. It would be slow today and they were certainly all ready for the weekend. Tomorrow night they might be at full occupancy.

A little before noon she emerged from the glassing room. "I think it's ready, Shaper. Will you take a look?" I followed her back.

I approved. I had not told her which side of the board to use as her canvas but she had chosen the bottom. I was glad of that — Michelle's face wouldn't be obscured the first time I applied surf wax to the top. And she wouldn't be looking at me all the time I was in the water.

The 'portrait' was mostly tans and browns and done in areas of flat color, sort of like those old paint-by-numbers pictures. It worked but there was that discoloration around it. "Should I go ahead and paint that white?" Charlie asked. "I wasn't going to until you looked it over."

"How about a frame?" I asked. "An oval? No, a diamond, dark brown border with an opaque yellow inside to cover those marks." I looked through her paints and picked one out. "This would do. Maybe mix a little white into it. Think you could handle that?"

She nodded. Maybe I should give the girl three months off her payments for all this, I told myself. "You might want to mask it off. Lots of tape over there." I pointed in the direction of my supply shelves. "And a ruler to get it right."

"I'll measure it out on a piece of paper first," she said. Good idea.

"Want some lunch before you start? I have bland and healthful goodies in my kitchen." By now she had caught onto the little joke I shared with her mother.

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“Thanks, Shaper, but I think I’ll run over to the store and pick up something bad for me. I’ll be right back.” I was sure she would be, but darned if I didn’t worry a little while she was gone. I worry about pretty much everything. You should know that by now.

Chapter 39

“Why do you surfers wear those baggy, long-legged shorts?” asked Sara Trejo. Her husband looked like he might want to hear an explanation too.

“If you sat on a waxed surfboard for very long with it rubbing the inside of your thighs, you would know the answer to that.”

“Oh, surfer rash,” said Jim. “I hadn’t thought about getting it there.” He chuckled. “And bike riders actually do about the same thing to protect our thighs.”

“A good argument not to pursue either pastime in the nude,” I pointed out.

“Ouch!” said Jim.

“You would look good,” his wife told him. Maybe so but I figured it would be distinctly uncomfortable. “Stay close, Stevie,” she called to her toddler.

“You were off duty today?” I asked Jim. “I would think you would want to keep away from the beach on your off days.”

“But I never get to come,” Sara told me. “He is always down here riding on the weekends and I have to stay home.” She pretend pouted. “I grew up on the beaches!”

“Miami?” I hazarded.

“Yes, Ted. That was easy to guess, no?” She said something in Spanish to Jim. I could catch a couple words but not enough for the meaning. Never could understand Cubans. Mexicans are another matter.

So I was able to understand Jim, who was Mexican-American. Mostly I understood him. Something about going to dinner, I think. “Don’t let me keep you from your plans,” I said, and rose from the

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bench. I had only intended to say hello when I saw them there. “Good evening, Sara. See you, Jim.”

And why was I by the beach on a Thursday evening? Charlie had run out of paint and I had driven her up to the craft store. And advanced her a little money. Now I was just killing some time while she got what she needed. Dang, it was getting to be like having kids of my own. My heart went out to Rick and Kay.

I saw her coming back across the highway, dangling a plastic bag. She must have found what she needed so I didn’t ask, just got in the truck and started the engine. One of these days this old beast won’t start, you know, I told myself. Charlie slid into the front seat and began sorting through the items she had purchased.

“Finish that picture off when we get back, let it dry overnight, and I can glass it in tomorrow,” I told her. “I might be surfing the board by Monday.”

“Mom has to be there the first time.” That was a reasonable request. “Man, it’s almost dark out.”

“Do you want me to drop you at the motel? You could finish tomorrow. There isn’t much to do.”

“There won’t be time tomorrow. Busy weekend starting.”

“Okay. But call your mother when we get back to the shop.” Now I was feeling even more like a parent.

All that was needed were a few touch-ups and a coat of sealer. She was done within half an hour and the board would be ready to glass tomorrow. Or Saturday or Sunday. It didn’t matter that much. Again, I walked Charlie home.

“You’ll get better at it,” I told her, “and faster. You’re feeling your

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way now.” And she had picked a rather complex picture to start off with. “I am going to take three payments off for all the work you’re doing.”

“No, Shaper, we agreed on two. I want to stick by my contract.” She held up her plastic bag. “And you did buy me more art supplies today.”

I had seen that as a loan, but okay. “No guests at all tonight?” I asked Michelle, who had been standing in the office doorway. Waiting for us, I would think. The parking lot was empty.

“Out to dinner,” she said. “Everyone has to eat. How ’bout you, Ted? Want to come in and join us?”

“Say yes,” Charlie whispered in my ear. But loud enough for her mother to hear.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good. I hate difficult men.” We followed Michelle into the apartment. “Would you mind pasta again? I can’t think of much else vegetarian.”

“Then you’ll have to come over and share beans some time,” I informed her. “I eat lots of beans.”

“That explains a great deal,” commented Charlie. “What kinda pasta, Mom? No meatballs, I guess!”

“Pasta primavera,” she replied. “Yes, Ted, I’ve had that in mind all along if I could cajole you into eating here again.”

“I love pasta primavera,” I told her. Which was completely true. I fixed it for myself pretty regularly, but I would not tell Michelle that.

“This party the Bells are throwing is supposed to be for me, sort of,” she said, as she busied herself in the kitchen. “I know, Charlie,

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it's not really something to celebrate but it does mark a big change in my life. Yours too. It hadn't hit me just how big until Brad signed those papers and I got them into the mail."

"That's why it's on Saturday," said Charlie. "It's the best time for Mom to attend."

"Officially, it's a 'welcome to the neighborhood' sort of thing," Michelle added.

"Kind of a lousy time for the Edwardses," I said, "But then, it's not for them."

"They have to stay at the art show until it closes down, don't they? That's too bad. But all our weekend guests here are staying over so there is no checking people in and out on Saturday. Just some tidying of rooms and that sort of thing."

"I'll stay and be in charge," announced Charlie. "Maybe Jan will come over and hang with me."

I could see broccoli. Frozen, but that's okay. And rotini. I hoped for pea pods.

Chapter 40

There was a bit of a swell this morning. I'd be back over with my board later; no sense in running up to the pier. Quiet at the motel, as usual at a quarter after Five.

I hadn't hung that long last night. I had sat down and watched a television program for the first time in years. Something about friends. It looked like TV hadn't improved much. But watching it had — snuggling next to Michelle greatly improved the experience. And I only slightly chafed at being idle that long.

No more of that for a couple or three days. She would be busy, I would be busy. Not that we couldn't make time if we wanted, I suppose. But what good is grabbing a few hurried minutes?

Ha, if it were surfing I wouldn't hesitate to grab those minutes!

It occurred to me that I hadn't said anything to Chief Cotton about running into Bradley Jackson. Hadn't even thought about it. I wondered if he knew. Oh well, I'd see him sometime. I slipped in my back door and smelled the fresh coffee. Just what I needed.

It grew steadily more stormy through the day. A messy weekend coming, at least tomorrow. Might clear by Sunday. That would make Monday or Tuesday a good day to run up to the pier and spray some paint, with no rain in the forecast. Very early of course.

By afternoon, I could see the lot filling up at the motel. They're probably getting some cancellations with this weather, I told myself. It was certainly cutting into my traffic. Tomorrow would undoubtedly suck. I fled to my glassing room as soon as a helper came in.

Just the one board, my board. Or Charlie's board, as I'd come to think of it. But it was really Michelle's board, wasn't it? I mean, it had her picture on it. I might even name the board Michelle. I

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named some of my boards. Some I didn't. Why the difference, I have no idea.

I had given some thought to how heavy I should glass this one. It's always a trade-off between strength and weight. I'd gone with strength on my big wave board. Maybe go lighter here, but not as light as the little thrusters I made for the kids. Six ounce cloth instead of four.

If the board rode well, I might do some more for the shop. There was always a market for fun boards for the older surfer. I'd probably have to stick three fins on them, however. In boxes, so the surfer could have a choice on what to use. This board, though, would have one permanently glassed-on fin. I had made that, too. I sometimes sanded one or two out of thickly-layered resin-filled fiberglass when I had nothing better to work on. It was a good use for the spare bits of glass cloth I had to cut off when I glassed a board.

I fixed it in place after glassing, but before applying my sanding resin. Which was the last step and then I quit for the afternoon. I could sand tomorrow or anytime, really.

And it wasn't that late. I looked it over before switching off the light. Maybe a colored rail would be nice. Nothing else, other than Charlie's artwork. I would want a good glossy finish to show that off.

Pop into the showroom. Everything's okay. A few kids. Staying out of the rain, I reckon. I should keep an eye on them. But I need a shower first. It's good that it is a warm day, even if the sun isn't breaking through. Ten years, and I still hadn't fixed myself an indoor shower.

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Hey, there's music from next door again. Pretty much the same kind as before. I was never big on that overblown Seventies rock. Practically stopped listening until Punk came along and rejuvenated things. I walked over close to the hedge. Yeah, that's the radio. I know the station. As long as they don't play it any louder, I'm okay.

I should get the guitar out and practice some more, I thought, as I rinsed myself. It was lying on the bed in the spare room right now, wasn't it? Pretty sure I didn't put it back in its case.

Okay, towel off and back inside. Have to be a little more modest, a little more careful on the weekends with more people around. And kids! Last thing I would want is to be arrested for accidentally exposing myself to a teenage girl. That wouldn't help business at all.

According to the sign on my door, it was still an hour till closing time. It looked like night, with the dark wall-to-wall clouds racing across the sky. "Let's call it a day," I told the kid half-asleep behind the counter. There was no one else left in the shop.

Chapter 41

Sometimes I made it to early mass on Sundays. It had to be early or not at all. If there was surf, then not at all.

But the latest swell was over and there was nothing but wind-blown crap rolling in at the beach. So here I was. Pat would probably want to attend mass next weekend. He was way more observant than I was. Not more Catholic, necessarily, just more observant.

That was something else that had brought us together, back in college. Yeah, there was the surfing and the art, but we also shared this Catholic thing. Back then, he wasn't quite so observant, maybe, and definitely needed to visit confession more frequently than he did. But he had settled down. People do that.

I was at a friendly nod level of acquaintance with most of these church-goers. I couldn't have supplied names. I didn't see most of them during the week.

The Trejos were not here this morning, not that they were usually. I think Sara and Jim preferred the vigil mass on Saturday evening. It was convenient to when he got off duty. Or did they show up at the Spanish service, every other Sunday night?

But I liked going to mass. Once, I had even been a choir member, in a different town and a different time. And as I had jokingly told Michelle, I am religious but not spiritual. I have to believe with the mind. Give me logical arguments. Give me Thomas Aquinas.

So you see why I was still kind of Catholic. Oh, like many another, I have days I believe and days I do not. Believe in God, in there being a point to it all.

No more deep thoughts right now. After mass, I cruised north on

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A-1-A along the ocean. I hadn't driven up that way in a long time. There was new building going on. Not a lot, but some. For a couple miles, the highway clung too closely to the beach for any construction on the Atlantic side. Then it veered inland. Good place to turn around. I didn't want to go all the way to Banner Beach. One had to be a member of their community to even use the beach there. I had always hated that sort of thing. Hated it as a kid in Genoa. Hated it now.

Back south. I'm tired of driving, anyway. Never cared for it though I used to take long surf trips. It is turning into a nice day, isn't it? By the time I passed the pier, Nine-ish, the beaches were crowded, despite the chilly wind blowing off the water.

I had finished 'Michelle' yesterday, sanded smooth, burgundy-red rails and shiny gloss coat applied. I would buff it out sometime today or tomorrow. The glass job had enough time to cure well and it was ready to ride. I was tempted to carry it across the road and show it off.

Not until there are some waves. That might be a while. And who knows? The thing might be a complete dog in the water. Though I knew enough by this time to have a good idea of how any board would ride.

I opened up shortly after getting home. A good day for business — mostly tourists, not surfers. When it's a little too cool to get in the water, they go in the shops. It was a bit of a surprise when Joan and Bill Cotton came in around Two.

"Joan wants to look over your shirts herself," said Bill.

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"She didn't like your choice?" I had thought it quite nice. But I thought all my shirts deserved that description.

"Oh, it was fine, Ted," said Joan. "I want one for myself. Bill and I don't have to be twins all the time!"

"Ah. We have sundresses in aloha designs, too," I pointed out. That should keep her busy for a while. "Want to step out back, Bill?"

He nodded. "I don't know if your men spotted him," I said when we were standing outside, between the house and the garage building, "but Brad Jackson visited the motel."

"So I heard, Ted. Not from my guys but from the Feds. They've been watching, apparently." He seemed a little peeved. I guess they hadn't told him. "You talked with him?"

"Yeah. But it was all about him signing his divorce papers. I have no idea what else the man might be up to."

"Good enough." He looked around. "You should hang a tarp across those solar block," he advised. "Keep your shower a little more private and a little less windy on days like this."

Yeah. I should have thought of that. Or maybe I had but just hadn't carried through. I wasn't sure. "Your neighbors have been peeping at you." He pointed south. "I probably shouldn't tell you this but the DEA rented that place. Those are agents over there."

"Ah, that explains their lousy taste in music."

"Country music is the only music," stated Bill Cotton. "We have a great band for the festival."

"Should I yell 'play Snow Bird' at them?" Bill groaned.

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“You build your boards back here? I’ve never really seen this part of your place.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t. I’m not sure all of it is legal.” We went around the south side of the garage.

“Not my department. If zoning lets you get away with it, it’s okay with me.” I lifted the garage door on the glassing bay and we went in. Of course, the board on the racks in the middle of the room drew his attention. “That’s Michelle Jackson, isn’t it? Did you do that?”

“Her daughter.” He nodded thoughtfully. Which doesn’t mean he actually had any thoughts. “I just finished building this as a personal board.”

“Well, you’d better hang onto this girl then, Ted. It’s not quite a tattoo but it comes close.” As I pulled the door back down, he asked, “Is Mrs. Jackson doing all right? Anybody bothering her? We haven’t heard anything more of Ray Manuel. In fact, you’re the only person who saw him.”

“But I did see him, so he might still be around. But no, no one has bothered Michelle.”

“If she hadn’t told you she knew him, we might have thought you had made a mistake. Let’s go see how much Joan wants to spend.”

I undoubtedly hoped it would be more than he did.

Chapter 42

It was a pretty rare morning when I did not take my walk to the beach. But I knew the surf would be nonexistent this morning and I knew that those cold northerly winds that blew all night would have dried things out nicely. As soon as I had a little coffee and a scone in me, I drove north toward the pier.

Before Six, I was walking along the curb, spray can in hand, marking the art show spaces. Last year's marks were still legible, for the most part. I could extrapolate those that weren't or, if really necessary, look at the sheet of paper I was carrying. This was way before anyone much was out. Stores all closed, even the coffee shop. No bicycle patrol this early. They didn't get out till Nine or Ten most days. But a patrolman did cruise by in his blue-and-white Taurus, looked at what I was up to, and drove on.

Across the street, a few fishermen came and went on the pier. Early morning joggers bounced along the boardwalk. Space Twelve. That was the one Pat had been assigned. It seemed as good as any. Toward the middle of the block.

Twenty-two spaces and then on to the next block south. Forty-four in all. Let me see, if it extended all the way to my place we would have a hundred and thirty-two. Well, no, that would only be as far as the *Easy Breezes*. Add maybe another ten? I had seen shows that large. Gainesville. Cedar Key. We could grow.

But the downtown business guys would probably want to grow west, not south. Having our own little festival down there might not be so bad. Was that the last? Okay, back to the truck.

Someone coming out of the coffee shop. Manager. I remember

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him. "Come on in, man, and have a free cup. We want to show our appreciation."

"You open this early?" I asked, following him in. I'll always take free.

"Not till Seven but there is prep work to do. I'm John." he said, offering his hand.

"Ted."

"Yeah, I know," he said with a wide grin. "Shaper." Oh, I knew this guy as a kid. Not that he was much more than one now. And didn't we have some not-very-flattering nickname for him? Best forgotten, no doubt.

I settled at one of the tables outside. The metal chairs were kind of cold at this time of morning. "So, a former surf-rat made good?"

"Ha, not that good Shaper. At least I'm above minimum wage now."

"If I figured all the work I do around my place, I might make less an hour than you," I told him.

"Yeah, but any one of us would trade places with you. You know that, too."

I did. Yes, I did. "Pretty decent coffee," I told him. "It's good to be able to make something well."

"Yeah, I guess it is. I gotta get back to work. Take care, Shaper." John stepped back inside and I carried the still half-full paper cup to my truck.

Very guru-ish, I told myself. I need to stop dispensing wisdom. I was home five minutes later.

Charlie and Michelle were probably already stripping beds and

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throwing wet towels into piles. Mondays were the hardest day over at the motel. Rick's truck was gone. He must be working somewhere too.

I could go buff out the board before I opened. I didn't do that for a lot of boards anymore. To many guys, the shiny gloss finish was just another layer that added weight. They were right of course. A fine-sanded satin surface was every bit as good and a little lighter.

But it looked so nice when I was done. Didn't take very long either. Still had some time to kill. What were the Feds across the hedge up to? I wondered. If they could spy on me I should be able to spy on them. Nah, not worth the effort.

I would rather spy on my other neighbors. Kay would be at loose ends today, just like me. Monday was always a bit of a let down after the weekend for us. I had considered just closing the shop one day a week, Monday or Tuesday, and taking off, but I kept such irregular hours anyway it didn't seem to make much sense. I remembered when I was a little kid many businesses would close on Wednesdays, or at least the afternoons. That was an old Deep South thing.

Way in the past. Now everybody wanted to be open all the time. Twenty-four hours a day, even, like the convenience store up the street. Did the comings and goings there bother the Bells at night?

I imagine it woke up their dogs at least occasionally.

But I knew who I would really prefer to spy on. I wasn't fooling myself. A green minivan pulled into my drive. One of the wholesalers who dropped by now and again. I could never keep track of their schedules. All right, I didn't bother. You've got me there.

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This guy did jewelry, didn't he? Oops, didn't she? I opened up the front door to let her in. A little too cool to leave it ajar. Maybe in a couple hours.

"Hi, Mr. Carrol," said the energetic young saleslady. I had absolutely no memory of her name but I certainly remembered the rest of her. "How are things going?"

"Well enough." A stock, noncommittal answer, as I'm sure she recognized. "Have anything new and exciting for me?"

"Besides myself?" she asked. Oh yes, I recalled that this one liked to flirt. It didn't help her sell anything here. Maybe even hurt a little. Her eyes swept across the shop. Trying to find where I displayed her products. "We have a new line of retro-surfer charm bracelets." She said it, not me.

"How retro?" I asked. She wasn't sure.

"Um, classic surf designs." Then she got a little more sure of herself. "Woodies. Iron crosses. Long-boards." I think she had memorized the literature.

"Sixties retro," I said. "That's what I am in the flesh."

"You surfed in the Sixties?" I think she was actually interested. I pointed out a picture behind the counter of sixteen-year-old Ted Carrol propping up his nine-six long-board.

"I — I didn't know you were that old. Maybe I shouldn't say that!"

"We'll just keep it between the two of us. Honestly, your charm bracelets sound pretty dreadful and I wouldn't want them in my shop. But let's see what else you have in your van."

Which was more junk jewelry and beach-related nick-knacks. It

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wasn't an unpleasant way to spend a morning hour and we did do some business before I sent Monica — I eventually figured out her name — on to the next shop. I hope she loaded them down with charm bracelets.

Chapter 43

Time for the unveiling. The surf wasn't great nor was this the best spot, but I carried the new board across the highway to 'my' break. I'd always thought of it as such and so did most of the kids by now. They called the place *Shaper's* sometimes, though *Motel* was just as popular a name.

I was thinking I might start referring to it as *Michelle's*, just to see if the name would stick.

"That's interesting," had been Michelle's comment on seeing her face on a surfboard. "Nice work, Charlie." Which was true. Charlie had done a good job. Or good enough. One could pick nits and I was kind of trained to do that.

The two stood on the beach and watched me paddle out. Now, if I could just not mess up on the first wave and look like an idiot. I'm kind of good at doing that. It was an odd sort of little easterly swell, lined up well enough but crumbling more than breaking. There was a bit of a peak over to my left. I paddled hard and dropped in, going right. On my backhand, that is.

Not much power, but I could trim, build a tad of speed, cut back toward the curl. The board did that nicely, as I thought it would. Not much more left to the wave. I had to straighten out in the white water. Cheers came from the beach.

They stayed around for a couple more waves but I reckon there was still plenty of work at the motel, and another big weekend on the way. It was simply impossible for two people to clean every room and wash every linen in that motel in the course of one day. But they should be caught up by evening on this Tuesday. Maybe even by afternoon.

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I rode a little longer but it wasn't much fun. I'd get this board into some good waves some other day.

"I'm worn out!" said Charlie when she walked into the shop, mid-afternoon. "And we'll have to do it all again."

"The motel business would be great if it wasn't for all the guests," I observed.

"I'll have to tell Mom that one. By yourself?"

"Uh-huh. Richie should come in soon. Theoretically."

"He's back with Cathy, you know." I didn't. "I saw them making out, sitting on our wall." She smirked. "She's kind of bossy. He likes her but she aggravates him."

"He's a bit spoiled," I said.

"He's a mama's boy. And Cathy is a whole lot like his mama."

I burst out laughing. "You got that one right."

"What's funny?" asked Richie as he came in the door. Sure enough, Cathy was with him.

"You," Charlie told him. "I gotta go, Shaper. Maybe you should come by now we're not so busy."

"But tired," I reminded her.

"Yeah, we are. But the worst we could do is fall asleep on you."

I could walk over later. Phone first? Maybe. Or leave it to tomorrow when Michelle would have a chance to recharge. I did want to see her. I did like her.

A relationship? Well, we already had one. Of sorts. A few kisses, an evening watching television qualified, but barely. It had been a long time since I had been in any kind of relationship with anyone.

But I remembered. There had been women, some serious, but

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none serious enough. My thoughts drifted all the way back to college, to Patty. My first. I had the rather uncomfortable thought that she had looked quite a lot like Janice Bell. Another surfer girl.

I remembered, but I could not recapture. My world had changed and all the surfer girls had grown up and had little surfer girls and surfer boys of their own. And I was letting them hang around my surf shop and call me 'Shaper' until they grew up too and left me behind.

It wasn't such a bad thing.

No, I wouldn't go over to the motel today. I had seen Michelle this morning. We each knew the other was still there and still interested. There might be more cheap dates in my kitchen or macaroni dinners in our future. Who knew?

I realized Richie was staring at me. "Did you fall asleep, Shaper?"

"No, I was awake kid. Dreaming, but awake."

Chapter 44

How better to charm a pair of very tired girls than with a plate of brownies fresh from the oven? Maybe not so tired this morning, but still. They were baking as the sun rose. And delivered shortly after.

A disheveled Charlie answered when I rang at the office door. I don't think Charlie is a morning person. But she was already up. At least I hadn't roused her from her bed.

"Mom! You have a gentleman caller! Get out of your bathrobe!"

"Don't be mean to your mom," I told her, as she opened the door to me. "She doesn't have to dress. I'll just leave them here for you guys."

"Okay, Shaper. Thanks!"

Michelle poked her head through the apartment doorway. "Oh. Those smell good Ted. Are you going to stay and share them?"

"No, I'll run along now. Maybe see you later?"

"Maybe." She closed the door .

"I take it your mother wasn't really up yet."

"We don't bounce out of bed at Five AM like you."

"Your loss. Later." Out the door and away. There, I'd done something. Made a gesture, sent a signal. Been a friendly neighbor. Something.

I felt ambitious enough to attend to shop business all morning. I didn't have any board orders at the moment, nor a need to build any for stock. And it was Wednesday again. Already. Jan was on her own when she came in today.

"I signed up for my Spring Semester classes, Shaper," she told me. "I'm going to have to adjust my schedule."

"Not a problem, Jan, but thanks for telling me. And if you think

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you need more hours, let me know.” She wasn’t making much here, that was for sure. Nowhere near as much as a college sophomore needed. I wondered if Jan was moonlighting somewhere else.

“Okay, Shaper. I have to balance it with my time in Mom’s shop.” Of course. Hadn’t I known she helped out there?

Shoppers came and went all afternoon. This was more like it. Maybe I could stay in business another week or two. A lull. “I have something to show you,” I told Jan, and disappeared into the back. I returned with the new surfboard.

“Well, that’s something else, Shaper. Just what, I’m not sure!” She regarded it for a while. “Does it ride well?”

Practical Janice. “That it does. I may build a couple more for stock.”

“Might be fun on really small days. I could see Dad riding something like this.” Me too. The target buyer. Jan turned to take care of a shopper, hopelessly lost among the tank tops.

It’s too crowded in here, I thought. How could I expand? Maybe put a doorway through to one of the bedrooms?

It was around Four-thirty when Michelle showed up. “Hi Jan,” she said. “How is it going with you?”

“Pretty good, Mrs. Jackson. How’s Charlie?”

“Good. Come and visit sometime.” She faced the girl and asked, “How would you feel about calling me Miss Sandor instead of Mrs. Jackson?”

“Miss Sandor.” Jan tried it out.

“Nah, forget that. Dumb idea. Call me Michelle, okay?” She smiled. “Forget the Mrs. thing, anyway.”

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“Okay.” I think Jan was willing to agree to almost anything.

Michelle came on over to where I was jotting down some notes as I looked over my merchandise. Some of this stuff had been sitting here gathering dust way too long. “Hey there, Ted. Thanks for the yummys this morning. It was nice of you.”

“It was meant to be.”

That tickled her. “I’m sure it was! Hey, I used to get brownies that had, um, an extra secret ingredient in them. You got any like those?”

“I remember them. Baked by elves, weren’t they?” She gave me a pained look. “But no, I’m not much on secret ingredients.” Never had been.

“Okay.” She didn’t seem very disappointed. Nor surprised. I doubted that Michelle was a pot head but most of my adult friends used. The Bells. Susan and Joy. I think maybe they grew their own.

Her eyes turned to the surfboard leaning against the counter. “I was kind of taken aback to see my picture on your surfboard. Even though Charlie had mentioned the idea.”

“Wait until I display it in my window.”

“You wouldn’t.” I could tell she was uncertain about how serious I might be.

“The idea is to sell more boards. I could put an ‘artwork by Charlie’ sign on them and add fifty bucks to the price.” Maybe more. No need to tell her that.

“You think?”

“Hey, I like Charlie but I do run a business. Anything to give me an edge.” This was all true. I knew such thoughts had been mingled

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into my motivations. “But I’ll put this in the back now. This board is for me. All for me!” I did my best maniacal laugh.

“You are an idiot,” Michelle Jackson — or Sandor — told me.

“It was time you learned that,” Jan said.

Michelle followed me out the front door, I with the board under my arm. There was more chance of banging it into something if I tried to go out through the narrower doors in the back. I was a walking example of Murphy’s Law so I had learned to be careful.

I kept my own boards in a shed or locker or whatever you might want to call it attached to the back wall of the house. Right next to the shower, actually, so it made a south wall for that facility. The agents really couldn’t see me in there unless they went out of their way.

In next to Big Red and the new gun and a crumbling diamond-tail that I hardly ever rode anymore. Would it be worth repairing? My ancient long-board was too tall to fit in there so it leaned against the outside of the shed. “Like to come in?” I asked Michelle.

She nodded. “Can Janice run things on her own?” She immediately replied to herself. “Of course she can.”

We stepped into the kitchen. “Some coffee?” I asked.

“I’d — I’d rather have some of you.”

Our lips met. We both pulled back, looked at each other for a second or so, and dove back in.

“About time,” she murmured. I agreed but was too busy to say so. Our hands explored. Mine slipped inside her shirt, sliding up her back, gliding across the smooth skin. This was kind of awkward,

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standing here in the kitchen. Should I direct us toward the bedroom?

“No,” she said.

No? Oh. All right. I pulled away.

“I want all night. That means the motel.”

“Of course.” We couldn’t leave Charlie over there on her own. Though I did feel a little odd about having her in the same apartment while we — well, did things.

And we were going to do things. Oh, yes, we were.

Chapter 45

"I won't be back for a while," I told Jan. "Lock up, will you? Everything."

"Sure, Shaper." The girl looked at the two of us, standing hand-in-hand at the doorway, but said no more.

I felt like everyone in the neighborhood was watching us as we walked up the sidewalk. Maybe even the federal agents. That made me smile and I put my arm around Michelle's waist. Might as well make some good photos for them.

Across the highway to the quiet motel. Charlie was sitting at the desk in the office, writing something down. "I brought someone for dinner," Michelle told her.

I'm sure Charlie recognized that we had more than dinner on our minds. And I did indeed feel odd about it. "We have beans," she offered, and grinned at me.

"Not the night for that," her mother told her.

We were in each others arms again as soon as we were in the apartment. "Okay," said Michelle, giving me a gentle push away. "We really are going to have a nice dinner first. If we go in there," she glanced toward the bedroom door, "we might not be likely to come back out."

"The point of no return."

"Yeah, something like that." She laughed and opened a cupboard door. "I'm not feeding you pasta again. How about rice?"

"Fine with me. Anything would be fine with me right now. I'd probably eat a steak if you set one in front of me."

"Too late to buy one." She took a box of rice from the shelf, the

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quick stuff. Being who I am, I pretty much stick to brown rice. “A veggie to go with it.” She rummaged in her freezer.

I went behind the counter. “Do you have any onions?” I asked. She shook her head. Probably no fresh carrots either. Hmm, dried onion among the spice bottles on the counter. And something labeled ‘Italian Seasoning.’ Those could work. “Any garlic?”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t feed you garlic tonight!”

“It would give me stamina,” I told her. “Okay, no garlic.” But there was a garlic salt container. And I was pleasantly surprised to see a bottle of olive oil. “Let me fix the rice,” I said.

“Anything,” she replied and gave me a peck. If she hadn’t been too quick, I might have turned it into something more. She turned back to the fridge.

“Oh, peas,” I said, looking over her shoulder. “Perfect to go with the rice.” I reached in and grabbed the bag.

“Make yourself at home, Mr. Carrol.”

“Just my intention.” I took another glance into the freezer compartment. “I do eat shrimp and such,” I told her, noticing a box of them. “Something for future reference.”

“Don’t be sure you have a future. You may not survive this night. Fish?”

“Fish? Oh, you mean do I eat them. Nah, just shellfish. Nothing with a backbone.”

She didn’t ask for an explanation, which was just as well. “I’m going to heat up some hot dogs for Charlie,” she said, taking out an already opened package. “Maybe for me too, depending on how

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good a cook you are.” She got some buns from the cupboard to go with them. “They don’t have backbones either, you know.”

It didn’t take long to get something resembling a pilaf on the table. But Charlie preferred her hot dog. Maybe Michelle did too.

“Your artist friend is coming in Friday night,” remarked Charlie.

“Maybe I should come over to greet him.”

“He called and said it would be a late check-in.”

“Has to wait for his wife to finish her work day, I would think. She’s a teacher.” I had almost certainly mentioned that before. “I’m sure Pat will have everything loaded in his van and be ready to hit the road.” It was what, a six hour drive or thereabout?

Michelle said, “You can hang around here as late as you want. Any day.”

Charlie gave her an exaggerated look of disapproval. “I would never get any work out you, Mom!” She made an abrupt conversation direction change. “We should rent a movie sometime. What kind do you like, Shaper? Mushy romances like my mom?”

“Um, no, not really.”

“Not the awful slasher flicks Charlie brings home?” Michelle was clearly appalled by that possibility.

“Samurai movies.” One of my deepest secrets revealed. But it pretty much went over their heads.

“Like martial arts stuff?” asked Charlie. “Kung-fu?”

“No, young lady, not kung-fu.” The only thing I could say was, “I think I would have to show you one to explain it.” Without a TV set, I hadn’t actually watched any sort of movie in some time.

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“Okay. I’m up for it.” She started clearing the table. “Are you guys going to hang for a while?”

I looked at Michelle. “A little while,” she said, and gave me a smile. “But expect us to disappear sooner or later.” Did I detect just a touch of embarrassment in Michelle’s manner? This was awkward for her, too. More than it was for me. I should have recognized that.

“I do,” Charlie replied. “Let me wash up the dishes.” I think she was handling it better than we were.

We sat for a few minutes on the couch, paying more attention to each other than the television. “I’m going back to the office for a while,” announced Charlie, and went through the doorway.

“That was our cue to go somewhere else too,” decided Michelle. “Charlie is good at reading situations.” She looked into my eyes. “We aren’t so good, are we?”

“We’ll manage anyway,” I told her. Me with my reticence, her with her sometimes blunt, even gauche, ways. We rose and went to the bedroom. Her bedroom.

I should probably remember more about it but my mind was on other things. “I haven’t been with anyone but Brad for a very long time,” she whispered.

“I know that.” I had assumed it, anyway.

Was our lovemaking awkward? I’m sure it was.

That made it no less wonderful.

Chapter 46

I don't sleep well in strange places. I lay awake, Michelle's slender body pressed against mine.

She's kind of bony, isn't she? I thought. One of the many thoughts that were passing through my mind, a steady flood of thoughts. I was half tempted to wake her, hold her close, love her once more in these early morning hours. No, let her sleep

I needed to pee again. I had heard Charlie in the bathroom sometime during the night. Wouldn't want any encounters there. That would go a step beyond awkward. I slipped out of the bed, a so-called full-size, and found my way to the facilities. There was a night-light burning in there, sending a faint greenish glow into the bedroom through the slightly ajar door.

Lock the other door so there would be no surprises. Would it wake anyone if I flushed? Better than leaving a stink. And back to Michelle, leaving both bathroom doors open just a tad.

She stirred. "What time is it?"

"Around Four."

"Mmm, okay." She went right back to sleep. Would that I had that capability.

At Five, I rose and slipped my clothes on. Should I wake Michelle? She knew I got up at this time. Into the living area. Quietly, Ted. "You cutting out?" came a voice from the sofa-bed.

"Yeah, Charlie. Time for my morning walk. Do you —" Should I be asking her this? "Do you think I should come back?"

"Nah. Go home and let Mom sleep in. I'll tell her I talked to you so she doesn't think you ran."

"Thanks, kid." I let myself out.

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There was a pretty good swell rolling. Within an hour, I was at the pier, my other Michelle with me. Her company proved enjoyable too.

I was about to leave when Jay Johnson came peddling up. Was this Jim's day off? "Just come on duty?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Those are good waves, aren't they?" He gestured toward the surf with his helmeted head.

"That they are. Pretty good."

"I don't know anything about waves." He looked out at them again. "I should if I'm going to patrol the beach, shouldn't I?"

I chuckled. "Might help."

"Yeah. I grew up in Scott City but hardly ever came over here to the water." He put a foot on one of his pedals. "They had to teach me how to swim in the Marines. I'll see you later, Ted." Off he went, toward the north, and then turning onto the pier. I wondered if he rode all the way to the end but didn't feel like hanging around to watch.

Enough goofing off. Big weekend coming and I needed to be prepared for it. But I just might be able to sneak in another session this afternoon. Back home I drove, slowing by the motel. If anyone had been outside, I might have gone in. Oh, there was Michelle with Kay, talking on the Bell's front steps. I wondered if I was a topic.

How could I not be? Waves from all as I headed on to my own drive.

Today was different from yesterday. Okay, that's always true but I mean really different. I showered quickly — have to remember to buy that tarp — and went inside. By myself again, if only for a few

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hours. I wondered if maybe Michelle had walked over here before stopping at Kay's.

Would I like having her here all the time? Or was it better to stay on opposite sides of the highway, have our separate lives that only intersected from time to time? It might make it easier if this didn't last. But I didn't necessarily want easier.

If it didn't last. I knew that was the more likely way for things to go. Things don't last, people don't last. One goes and another comes.

People are pretty much interchangeable, really. Not all that unique and all wanting much the same things. Why was it so hard to get them?

Should I open up? It was nearly time. I walked out front, out to A-1-A. No one in front of *Kay's Korner* now. Yeah, go ahead and open for business.

The lull before the storm. That's what today was. The Snow Bird Festival would launch officially tomorrow night, Friday, with a band playing by the pier, shops along the beachfront staying open late. Not mine, though. Too far from it all. There wasn't even much in the way of streetlights down here, if someone chose to walk this far. I should complain about that again.

But I would get business during the day. Maybe more than on Saturday and Sunday when there were events going on around the downtown.

On a whim, I called up the motel. There's a first time for everything. Answering machine. "It's Ted. Mmm, just wanted to say

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hello.” What else? Not going to say ‘I love you.’ “I’ll see you soon.” That would do. Soon covered a lot of ground.

I love you. I hadn’t said that to her face, either. Nor had she. We would. We both knew it.

Chapter 47

“There goes the new bike patrol guy,” said Robby.

“The nigger cop?” asked one of the boys. I was glad to see that the others all seemed to disapprove of that. “Not cool,” one muttered.

“The cop who would bust your ass if you gave him that kind of lip,” said another. They all laughed, even the original mouth-off.

These were the true surf-rats, middle-schoolers, most, some even younger. It made me feel cool just to sit with them.

Ha. Obnoxious brats, actually. I didn’t blame Jim Trejo one bit for sometimes getting on their cases. And I wouldn’t have sat with them when I was their age. I had seniority now.

“Who is that on your new board?” asked one. Did they call him Jeff? I would get all their names sorted out over the next couple years and then probably forget them as they moved on into being responsible adults.

“It’s his girlfriend,” proclaimed Robby. I guess he didn’t think I was gay anymore. That did not keep him from being aggravating. “Is she old like you are, Shaper?” They all thought that was hilarious.

“That’s the motel lady,” someone said. “You know her.”

“She’s cool,” spoke another voice.

“Her daughter is sexy,” came from Robby. At that age, all older girls are sexy. I remember.

“A retro girlfriend to go with a retro board,” I told them all. “I’m going back out.”

I was, of course, at the pier. South side, where I usually hung out, having returned for the late afternoon surf. Although I trusted the

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kid in my shop to take care of things in my absence, I would return in time to close up.

The waves weren't that great now. It had gotten windy, afternoon onshores. That was pretty typical, though not so much at this time of year. And the tide wasn't too good. But I messed around for another half hour or so before calling it quits.

"A Miss Sandor called while your were out," reported Joan, employee of the day. "She didn't leave a message. Anything else before I leave, Shaper?"

"No, that's fine. Want your pay now?" My pay schedule tended to be as irregular as their hours.

"Okay." I looked at my records. I should have paid her last week. Too nice a kid to say anything, I guess. I need to write a check for Lisa, too. Joan looked at the check I handed her, nodded, and said, "Thanks, Shaper." Out the door she went.

The phone rang a couple minutes later. "Hi Ted. I saw you drive by." It was Michelle, of course.

"Yep. I do that now and again."

"Um, about 'soon.' I expect guests to be checking in at all hours from now on through tomorrow. Maybe not a good time for us."

"Understood. We'll have to work out a signal for me to come over. Hang a scarf on the door or something."

"Or you could just phone."

"Aw, you want to take all the fun out of it."

"It will always be fun, Ted," she replied. "I'll see you tomorrow night, if you come over to meet your friend. And on Saturday."

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“Right. At the Bells’ party. I saw you talking to Kay this morning.”

“Just telling her what a great lover you are. Bye.” And she hung up.

She could have seen me blush from the motel, if she had stepped outside.

Chapter 48

Friday was busy indeed. I even opened up an hour early when I saw how many cars were parked along the road, how many people were strolling up and down the sidewalks.

But these were tourists. It wouldn't be a good weekend to sell to surfers. The older guys would want to avoid the crowded town altogether, go up or down the coast to other breaks. I had wondered from time to time if there was any point in having a shop at all. I could shape and sell boards to my core buyers, the surfers, without one. Maybe when I drew closer to retirement age.

Charlie popped in, late in the morning.

"Just checking on you for Mom," she claimed. I very much doubted her mother had asked her.

"Tell her I'm pining away over her." She would. I knew she would. "I am going to try to come by later."

"To see your friends? We're putting them in Room Six, if no one is around to direct you."

"Six. Okay." That would be in the east-west oriented wing of the L-shaped motel. Near the middle? Just by the office, actually. I wondered if that had been intentional or just luck of the draw.

"I'd better run. I promised to pick up a few things at the convenience store for Mom. In another year, maybe I can get my license back. It sucks to have to walk everywhere!"

"Why, I used to walk ten miles through the snow to get groceries. And I had to shoot 'em myself."

"Hmmp. I know you grew up on the beach, Shaper." Off she went.

Not entirely, but no need to tell her tales of my childhood. Betty

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and Pat were unlikely to arrive before Nine. Later, quite possibly. Past my bedtime, but I could make an exception.

I closed at Six — the official time on the door, though I was often out of there a half hour earlier. My intention was to go on up to the pier and see what was doing, not in my truck but on foot. I didn't like the idea of trying to find a parking space up there tonight.

A bite to tide me over. And grab a sweat, one with a hood. It would be pretty cool by the time I returned.

I cut through the backyards — no one seemed to see me at the Bell house — and then diagonally across the convenience store parking lot to the sidewalk. I'll stay on this west side going, I decided, and make the return trip on the beach side. It made absolutely no difference but I like to make plans.

Another block of homes-slash-businesses like my own and then it began to change. A motel that had been closed for ages and finally converted into mini-stores. At least half the spaces were empty. Three blocks up and the public beach started on the east side. I could hear music, distant, mostly the shake of the bass.

Now, it was purpose-built stores lining the sidewalk and no lawns between us. Most were still open on the festival eve, though usually they closed as early as I did. Men's clothing. Has that always been there? Lots of lights up by the pier.

Hey, they would be putting up the Christmas lights next week, wouldn't they? I was pleased to see no Christmas trees anywhere yet. I hated it when people start too early. Having the festival between Thanksgiving and the Christmas season might have something to do with them holding off.

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I poked into an antiques place for a couple minutes. Would never think of buying any of the stuff.

A country-rock band played in the parking lot north of the pier. Not my kind of music. Not at all. But this was a good place to cross the road and loop back to the south.

There was pretty sizable crowd gathered. Wasn't that —? Damn, it was. The lanky figure of Bradley Jackson lounged against a piling near the pier entrance. So he was still in town. Didn't the man have the sense to leave? This was no place for him.

Don't get worked up, Ted, I told myself. He's no threat to you.

I started south, pulling my sweatshirt hood close around my face. I had no desire for Brad to recognize me. Talking to someone now, an idiot out in this wind in short sleeves. Ray Manuel.

This I needed to tell to Bill Cotton. Or anyone official. There were supposed to be lots of police around tonight, weren't there? There goes Dave Blake, back on a bike. Just the person.

This block had been closed to traffic so the street was full of people. I followed as he slowly pedaled through the crowd. "Officer Blake," I called, when I caught up. "Do you know if the chief is around?"

"Should be but I don't know where." He wasn't paying much attention. Probably thought I wanted to talk to Bill about something festival-related.

"You'll do just as well. He needs to know that Bradley Jackson and Ray Manuel are over by the pier."

He whistled. Then he drew out a pad. "Write the names down, will you? I want to make sure I get them right." He pulled out his

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radio and talked to the dispatcher for a minute or so, glancing at the names I had jotted down. "Chief Cotton knows now. Thank you. Are you going to hang around?"

"I'd just as soon be far away," I admitted, "and I'm headed there."

Chapter 49

It was somewhat after eight before my leisurely walk back to the south brought me to the *Easy Breezes*. Most unlikely that the Edwardses had arrived yet but I might as well wait here. Yeah, the presence of Michelle made that idea more attractive.

Charlie was manning the office. Womanning the office? Girling the office? Darned if I knew. “Not here yet,” she said when I stuck my head in the door. “Mom is grabbing a quick nap.”

“Sensible,” I said. “I wish I was able to nap.”

“I can’t either. Unless I’m so tired I crash.” I nodded. Same with me.

I wondered if I should mention the presence of her step-dad to her. But not for long. It was a decidedly bad idea. “I’ll sit outside,” I told the girl. “Maybe I’ll see them drive in. Or maybe I’ll fall asleep.” Not a nap. This was nearly my bedtime.

A couple minutes later she came out and sat next to me, propping the door open behind her. “So I can hear the phone,” Charlie explained. “Though all I can do is tell people we’re already booked up.”

“Many more coming in tonight?”

“Three or four, I think. If they aren’t here by Eleven, we’ll just leave a key and a note for them.” She sighed. “And hope they don’t come ring our bell.”

A car pulled in occasionally, guests already checked in who were returning from dinner or the festival. A Subaru station-wagon with a load of racks on the roof. Could it —?

It was. “What happened to your van?” I asked Pat.

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“And it’s good to see you, too,” he replied. He looked at Charlie. “I declare, you have a younger girlfriend every time I see you!”

“Hmm, Mom should know about this. Good evening, Mr. Edwards. I’m Charlie. I spoke to you on the phone.”

He got out of the car and shook her hand. I looked in. “Hi Betty. How are you?”

“Worn out. How are you, Ted?”

I answered truthfully. “Better than usual. Your room is right there.” They were practically parked in front of it already.

She got out, holding a small travel bag. “You park the car, dear,” Betty called to Pat. “I’m going in and not coming back out. Oh,” she added, addressing me again, “we’re both too old to sleep in a van anymore so we decided this was more practical. We can’t stay young forever like you.” Pat passed her the key Charlie had just handed to him and in Betty went. And she did not come back out.

Pat looked much the same as ever. Short, full of muscles. I knew he lifted a lot these days. Took the place of surfing maybe. Balder. “It’s good to see you, Ted. Betty is right. You don’t get any older.”

“I feel older.”

“Man, I think you were born feeling old.” He turned to Charlie. “I’ll bet he hasn’t changed.”

“You might be surprised. My mom is getting him straightened out.”

“Oh. So that’s the situation, is it? What’s her name, Ted?”

“Michelle,” came a voice from behind me.

“She looks almost as young as the other one,” Pat said to me. He

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was lying but it was the proper lie for the occasion. "Pleased to meet you, Michelle."

"Hi Mr. Edwards. I love your paintings." That, too, might have been a lie.

"Call me Pat," he told her. "I'm only Mr. Edwards when I work as a substitute teacher."

"You still do that?" I asked.

"Now 'n' again. Helps us make ends meet. I'd better pull the car up." He backed the wagon into the proper space, took out an overnight bag of his own, and locked it up. "All my paintings are in there. I'm trusting they will be safe."

"There are lights all night," said Michelle. She sounded a bit uncertain about this subject.

"Don't give 'em grief, Pat," I said. "You know they aren't responsible for keeping an eye on your stuff."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry," he said to Michelle. "Want a beer?" he asked me. "I have a cooler."

I might have said yes had Charlie not been there. "Some other time. Bring some over to the party tomorrow."

"Oh yes, at Rick's place. Let me see if I remember — that's it catty-cornered to us here, right? And then —" He looked down the highway. "You're a couple houses down." He turned around again. "And the ocean is there." He pointed east. "I'd like to go look at it. Need to stretch my legs."

"Mind if I tag along?" Charlie asked us. "That okay, Mom?"

"If they'll have you. I'll hold the fort for a while."

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We walked past the pool. "Let's go over the wall here where it is low," I told Pat. "Wouldn't want you to fall and break your neck."

"You surf here sometimes, don't you? That must be convenient in all sorts of ways."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Shaper walks down our road before dawn every morning to check the waves," Charlie informed him.

"Shaper? They still call you that?" He turned to look at Charlie, following along behind us. "You know I gave him that name in college, don't you?"

"Really? You must have all sorts of interesting stories about him."

I'd better nip that before he launched into one. "Considering that I'm not a very interesting guy. Our Charlie here is a budding artist." Playing the art card was always a good move with Pat.

"Studying anywhere?" he asked.

"Not yet. But I'm gonna!"

We stood on the coarse sand, the surf just barely visible by a partly obscured moon. "I miss this sometimes," murmured Pat. "The sound. The smell. Don't ever take it for granted." He turned to me. "Will I see you before I head out in the morning?"

"I'll already be downtown, ready to help check you artists in." We started back.

"I hope you can come by my exhibit, young lady," Pat said to Charlie. She shrugged. Getting away would be hard for Charlie.

"You could ride along with me in the morning," I suggested. "I would have you back here by Ten."

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"If Mom says it's okay." Pat gave me a knowing smile. Yes, as Michelle had told me, I'm a softy. So is Pat.

"I'll turn in now," he said when we reached his unit. "I'll lay odds Betty is already asleep." He disappeared into Room Six.

Charlie went into the office but I hesitated. Hesitated just long enough for Michelle to come out.

I took her in my arms. "You know, I haven't told you I love you, yet."

"Then why don't you now?"

"I will. I love you, Michelle. I love you. I love you."

She giggled. "Making up for not saying it before? I love you, Edward Covington Carrol"

When had she even seen my full name, much less had the chance to remember it?

"Staying?" she whispered.

God, how I wanted to stay. "If you want me to."

"It may be the last chance for a couple days."

We went inside.

Chapter 50

“I’m going to have to put you on the force, Ted.”

I sat at a card table covered with envelopes and name tags. Charlie was wandering up and down the street while I helped artists find their assigned exhibit spaces.

“Would I get a pension?” I asked Bill Cotton. “That would be a deal-breaker.”

“If you put in twenty years. How old would you be then?”

“Old enough that you would have to put me on the wheelchair patrol. I take it you are talking about what I saw last night. Who I saw last night.”

“Right. The DEA loves you right now. They thought that things had fizzled here and nothing was going on.” He grimaced. “And I hoped that they had.”

“I guess this means more loud rock from next door.”

“’Spose so, Ted. But no more surveillance. Your showers are safe.” I must have looked a little puzzled. “They thought you might be involved. It has to be admitted, you were kind of in the middle of things.”

So I was. “Anything come of it? Last night, I mean.”

“No, but they did confirm their presence. The Feds haven’t told me if they learned anything more. Not likely to, either.”

“Okay. Name?” I asked the tie-dye clad lady who came to the table.

I walked with her to her space, showed her where and when she could park, and wished her luck. Ah, here came Pat’s wagon. Charlie saw it too, and waved.

I was back at my table by the time he made it there. I saw that he

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had already pulled his vehicle in by the correct space. Pat was a veteran of these shows.

Betty was with him. That was expected, at least first thing. I wouldn't expect her to sit all day. "Here's your packet, Pat," I told him, "and your name-tag. Do you want a tag, Betty?" No, she would rather stay anonymous. "I'll walk you over."

I watched him set up for a while. There were other volunteers and more than half the artists were here by now anyway. I could abandon my post. Permanently, within the next hour.

"You're more rain-proof than you used to be," I observed.

"Live and learn. But better coverage makes it hotter at summer shows."

"Oh, and prints. Good idea. Must have been Betty's."

He laughed. "Absolutely, Ted. Time to hang the pictures." Charlie was fascinated as these went up, until all his burlap-covered exhibition panels were filled. I left her there with them and returned to my post.

She was still hanging at Pat's booth when I returned, some forty-five minutes later, bending the poor guy's ear. "Gotta run you home now, Charlie," I told her. "And get ready to open my own place."

The truck was parked a block back from the highway. "I like Mr. Edwards's paintings," she said as we walked to it. "I like Mr. Edwards."

"He's a good guy. And he and Betty make a great couple." As unlikely a couple as one might come across, but they worked.

"He's your age? He looks older." She left it at that until we got

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into the cab. "But he acts younger, maybe," she added as she settled into her seat.

"He said I was born feeling old, didn't he? Maybe he is right."

We did not further discuss it as I drove south. I let Charlie out in front of the convenience store. "Tell your mom I'll see her at the party this afternoon," I said, and finished the half-block journey home.

"I'm going to have to depend on you to close up today," I told Josh Tuddle when he showed up. "The proper time for that is at your discretion." I would be cutting out by Four-ish. As expected, traffic through the shop was decent but not heavy.

It looked to be a great afternoon for an outdoor get-together. As I was out back, cleaning up, I could see some of the Bells' guests already standing around in their backyard. I would go stand around in just a couple minutes.

The usual suspects. And Michelle was there. It was time for the public display of affection. The first inkling for most of these folks.

"Hi, Kay," I said as I crossed into her yard. Rick was at the grill, a pretty well-engineered brick affair he had built in spare moments. A knot of guys were with him, most with beers in hand. "I hope your husband has some veggie burgers on the fire." I didn't expect an answer and didn't wait for one.

Michelle in my arms. A little kiss, not an ostentatious one. No need to make them all jealous! "Charlie is at the motel?"

"Um-huh. Jan went over to keep her company." She released me and said, "Thanks for taking her along this morning. You don't know how much it meant to her."

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I might. "Will your friends be along?" asked Kay, who had joined us. My arm remained around Michelle's waist.

"I think so. The show would have just officially closed for the day and it takes a while to pack everything up." Pat would certainly not leave his paintings hanging overnight, but the rest of the display would remain. "But," I added, "they might be too tired."

"And they would want to clean up first too," said Michelle. Yeah, hadn't factored that in. "I talked with Betty some when she came back to her room this morning. She has lots to say about our Ted."

"I'll bet. I only met her once. The other times Pat visited he was solo." Kay turned to me. "Great shirt."

Of course, I was in an Hawaiian shirt. Brown with blue palms and other assorted tropical stuff. "I wish Rick would put on something like that. You should have some too," she told Michelle. "You have the right look for them."

"She has the right look for anything," I declared, and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Or nothing," I whispered in her ear.

"Behave," she said.

"Give him time," said Kay. "They get lackadaisical about it all way too quickly."

An older Chevy was parking on the side-street. "There are the Chugtais. I didn't know if they would come." She wandered over to greet the arrivals.

As usual, I felt sort of out of place at something like this. I was glad to have Michelle next to me for support.

Well, not any longer. She turned and began chatting with a

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couple of women. I guess I'd go say hi to the guys at the grill. The cavemen huddled around their fire.

I could grunt, if called upon.

Chapter 51

“You’re Christians?” said Rick. “I guess I always assumed you were Muslim.”

“There are many Christians in Pakistan,” replied Ned Chugtai. No, that’s not his real first name but everyone but his wife called him Ned.

I think the beer in the man’s hand had been the clue for Rick.

“One religion is as bad as another. I prefer science,” declared Joy. Susan smiled at her indulgently. Everyone knew her partner’s outspoken atheistic views.

“Science can tell me why the sun rises in the morning but not why I should bother to do the same,” I said.

“You need a reason?” asked Ned.

“Sometimes. Sometimes I think its a miracle that I make it through another day.” This sort of talk wasn’t new to Rick. He’d known me a pretty long time and we did get philosophical now and then.

“You haven’t offed yourself yet, Ted. I expect you won’t after all these years.”

There had been times I had held a gun to my head and came within a breath of leaving this world. Long ago, not that I didn’t think of it now. I wouldn’t say any of that here.

Susie nodded thoughtfully. “If I had a painful, incurable disease, I might.”

“Sometimes life seems like a painful incurable disease.” I tried to make it sound like a quip.

“Someone find Ted some Zolof before this party is ruined,” said Rick. “Hey, here come Betty and Pat. And they’re dressed like Ted!”

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Yes, they were in aloha shirts. Not matching, though. Maybe I could get Betty into the shop tomorrow to look at my stock. Handshakes and introductions all around. "How did the day go?" I asked Pat when we had a moment.

He shrugged. "Pretty typical. Lots of lookers, not many buyers."

"Some will come back tomorrow with money."

"And some won't. I've always seen these shows as more for advertising than for selling." He did not sound enthusiastic. "This may be a bit too far to come for that purpose."

"Man, I figured you came to visit me and the show was just something on the side."

"Well, yeah. If you weren't over here, I wouldn't come. We won't have much to time to catch up."

"Heading straight home tomorrow?"

"Betty has to be at school on Monday morning. Maybe we should come over during Christmas break and spend some time. I do still have a surfboard."

"Or I could make you a new one." I looked around the yard. "Hey, let's go over to my shop for few minutes and I'll show you what I've been up to. No one will miss us." Josh had probably closed up by now.

"No one will miss me," he agreed.

"Yeah. I'd better tell Michelle." Reporting in. The down side of a relationship.

"Not much changed," remarked Pat as we stepped onto my drive. "Looks like home." He and Betty lived in a similar Fifties-style

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‘Florida’ house in Ruby. I took him around to the rear before going in. Had to show him the new board.

“That is Charlie’s artwork? Not bad. The subject matter is nice too.” He looked at me. “Hang onto her, man. It’s about time for you to have someone.”

People kept telling me that. We went in and I gave him a tour of the shop. Which mostly consisted of turning on the light and saying, “Here it is.”

It was the boards lining the walls that he wanted to see and that I wanted to show him. I had built a board for Pat nearly thirty years ago. My first customer, though I was in no way a professional then.

“I need a bigger board,” he said. “I’m no lightweight. Maybe something like your Michelle board, but a little longer.”

He had a good forty pounds on me. Maybe more. At least most of it wasn’t fat. “We’ll talk about it when you come back over.” I made sure to use ‘when.’ “Head back?”

“Uh-huh. I’m getting hungry.”

No veggie burgers but Rick had thrown a few shrimp on the barbie, as the catch-phrase went. The salads and side-dishes, for the most part, did not appeal. Over-seasoned for my taste. I picked a bit at this and that.

“He’s usually like this,” Kay remarked to Michelle. “It will be hard feeding him.”

“Nah. I can just give him pasta every night.”

A while later, Michelle whispered to me. “With Jan over at the motel, you know we could go to your place. I told them not to wait up.”

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Oh, I was tempted. But —

I shook my head. “Bradley is still in town and so is Ray Manuel. I spotted them both last night.” Her face was a blank. “I would rather not leave the girls alone overnight.”

A slow nod. “You’re right, Ted. Do the police know they are here?”

“Yes. I don’t think you need to worry.” But we both would.

“Maybe I’d better get back over there.” It was getting pretty dark, anyway.

“Okay. I’ll walk with you.”

We made our goodbyes. “We might as well go, too,” said Betty. “Are you ready, dear?”

“Sure.” The four of us crossed to the motel. “What time is early mass?” Pat asked me.

“Seven-thirty. Give you a lift?”

“Okay. You, um, staying here overnight?”

I looked at Michelle. She gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. “No, not tonight.” Too much going on. And Jan was there.

We parted at the office door.

Chapter 52

Shortly after Five AM. Quiet and cold. Waves? Just little choppy lines lapping on the shore. No excuse to skip mass. I guess I would have to take Pat.

Nothing doing at the motel. No light in his room. None in the office. I went home and drank coffee.

A knock came on the door an hour or so later. “Didn’t see any reason for you to come over and get me,” said Pat as he stepped in. “Any coffee left?”

“I’ll make another pot.” He settled at the table.

“There’s something going on with you and Michelle, isn’t there? Something other than just being a couple.”

I wasn’t surprised that he had picked up on it. Or maybe Betty had. Over cups of Colombian I gave him the abridged version. “Damn, Ted, this sounds like serious stuff. Don’t try to take on the whole load yourself.” He leaned back and just looked at me for a moment. “I know how you are.”

Yes, I knew how I was. I glanced at the clock. “Ready to go?”

“Let me use your john first.” I would need to do that also. A little too much coffee this morning.

Father Paul gave us a quick one. He liked to deliver pithy sermons and I liked that they didn’t take long. I had Pat back at the *Easy Breezes* well before Nine. Plenty of time to get his display set up. He and Betty headed off in the Subaru.

Betty, by the way, was not Catholic nor did she show any interest. Over the years I had gathered that she had some sort of nebulous deist beliefs. Not unlike a lot of my friends. If there had been a UU in Ruby, chances are she would have attended.

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No need for me at the festival so I returned to my shop. Joan came in for the afternoon. The surfer boyfriend who had talked her into this job had moved on but Joan was still here, and willing to take shifts on short notice. I would avoid losing her.

"I should be back to lock up," I told her around Four-thirty. "But if not, go ahead and do it yourself."

"Okay, Shaper. Going to see your girlfriend?" She managed to keep a straight face.

"I hope so," I said. "But the official reason is that I'm going over to say goodbye to my artist friend."

"I saw his pictures yesterday afternoon. I wish I could afford one."

She had good taste, too. I headed out.

Yes, they were back, racks on the roof, and getting ready to leave. Michelle was standing by their vehicle, talking with them. She and Charlie would already be tackling the cleanup for this weekend.

Pat and I shook. "Come back when you can, man. You need to get into some waves. And you be sure to come and keep him out of trouble," I told Betty, taking her hand.

"I will." She squinted at my old, resin-stained tee-shirt. "Does that have something to do with surfing?"

The name emblazoned across the front was Dawgs-n-Pups. "No. That's a defunct bluegrass band."

Michelle wrinkled up her nose. "I'm not fond of bluegrass."

"Me neither." How long ago was that? I had known those guys before I moved here.

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"I remember them," said Pat. "Didn't they play at the Florida Folk Festival?"

"We still go up there every May," said Betty.

"That's at White Springs," I told the baffled Michelle. "That's pretty close to Ruby."

"About an hour and a half," Pat said. "We should meet there this year."

"Like either one of us would be able to close down on Memorial Day," I said, giving Michelle a smile.

"Oh, yeah. Well, we should be on the road, Ted. Great to meet you, Michelle. Take care of this idiot, won't you?" Into the wagon and out onto the highway. A little too fast, but that was Pat for you.

"Back to work," Michelle groaned. "I'll try to have time for you tomorrow, Ted." A quick kiss and we parted.

Joan hadn't closed up. She wouldn't until the official time, I suspected, whether there were any customers or not. Ah, but there was someone in there. The Brit and his friend from the other day. I felt a sudden apprehension. "Go on home now, Joan," I said.

She looked up at the clock and shrugged. "Okay, Shaper."

"Nice young lady," said the short guy, the one with the southern accent, after she went out the door.

"Indeed," agreed the other. "It's time we introduced ourselves, Mr. Carrol, seeing as how we are neighbors." He pulled out his badge.

So these were the guys who listened to that god-awful music.

Chapter 53

“That’s part of our cover,” explained Bob Johns, the British agent. Well, not a British agent. An American agent who happened to be British-born. “That sort of dinosaur rock is rather ubiquitous with a certain segment of your lower class.”

Yeah, he did talk like that. “In other words, people ignore us,” added Agent Field. He never offered his first name.

“With all the goings-on, we had some suspicions about you,” continued Field. “And more when you got friendly with Mrs. Jackson.”

We stood in my shop. The ‘closed’ sign was on the door. This was as far as these two were going. I wasn’t about to invite them into my kitchen.

“At any rate,” said Johns, “we know better now. And you have been useful, Ted. I can call you Ted, can’t I?” I nodded. If he wanted to act like my friend, that was okay. “Keep your eyes open and remember someone is usually next door if you need us.”

“But if you have any info, it’s best to pass it on through Chief Cotton,” said Field. “Anything else, Agent Johns?”

“No. We just wanted to get you in the loop, Ted. We’ll be on our way.”

“Gentlemen,” I said, as they turned toward the door, “a completely unrelated question. How do like that house? I’ve been thinking of investing in property.”

“Falling down,” reported Agent Field. “I think it has termites too.” So much for that idea.

As they left, Field leaned in and confided, “I think Bob actually likes that music. I’ll try to get him to turn it down.”

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Good. I might just carry through on the suicide thing if I had to listen to 'Carry On, My Wayward Son' one more time.

I slept well. Maybe a sleep deficit had caught up with me because I never once woke up in the night. That has been a rarity all my life.

And a slow post-festival Monday. Expected. No surf to distract me, either. I wondered how Bill did at the chili cook-off. But not for long.

I got started on some new boards that afternoon. Just stock, but not for my own shop. There were a couple places down the coast that carried my surfboards and I needed to resupply. More often, they sent me custom orders to fill.

It helped out, although my profit was lower with a middleman. I should order some longer blanks, I told myself as I lifted a short-board blank down from my storage racks. Get started on those fun-boards I was thinking of.

I might even tackle a long-board. Those had been making a comeback. But I wasn't known for them. People knew what to expect from me.

They knew all too well, I thought, and chuckled to myself.

I could probably 'ghost shape' them for another label. I could spend all day shaping boards for other brands if I really wanted, and never poke my head out to interact with anyone. I had considered it, oh yes, before I had come here. Even done it for short stints.

The day was over almost before I realized it.

Chapter 54

“Wow.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say so I said it again.

“Wow.”

Charlie had gone blond. Pure snow-white bleached blond.

“Horrid, isn’t it?” asked Michelle as she followed her daughter into the shop.

There was no way I was taking sides.

“I’m going back to mess around with my paints,” proclaimed Charlie. “Let me know when you want me to do another board!” She went out the front door and up the drive. I had unlocked back there, hadn’t I? Yeah, sure.

Michelle turned to me. “It’s official. I am no longer a married woman. It will take a couple days for the papers to reach here but the attorneys’ office called and told me.”

“At last we can consummate our love.”

“Ooh, I can hardly wait.” She kissed me. “We’re mostly caught up from the weekend but I still have some work at the motel. I thought Charlie needed a break.”

“And you don’t?”

“I’m the boss. I’m not allowed to take breaks. You know how that is, fellow capitalist.”

“All too well. It would be nice to get away for a weekend, like Betty and Pat suggested.”

“We’ll just have to have our weekends in the middle of the week. We should be able to swing that when things slow down.”

Planning ahead. Was that a bad idea? Hope was always at the risk of disappointment.

“Yes, we should,” I agreed. “White Springs is a nice place, even

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when there is no festival. Great state park there right on the Suwanee.”

“How far?”

I had to think. “Four hours, maybe? Three if I drove like Pat. I should come up with some closer destinations!”

“If we went that far, you might as well go visit your friends in Ruby.”

“Nobody goes to Ruby except to fish. Or to go scalloping in the summer.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun. You eat them, right?”

“I do.” I had gone scalloping there with Pat, ages ago. And a girl I think I loved. We had broken up a month later.

“I’d better go,” said Michelle. “Did I mention that I loved you?”

“I heard rumors,” I said, and took her in my arms. “And I do love you, Michelle Whatever-your-name-is-now.”

“I’ll keep Jackson for a while. It’s on my driver’s license.” Away she went.

Richie had stuck with me and showed up for his Tuesday shift at a reasonable time. By himself, which I was glad to see. It was never good to have girlfriends hanging around. Nor boyfriends. That was even less desirable. “I’m going around back for a few minutes,” I told him.

“Is Charlie back there?” he asked, perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

“Yes. And you’re up here.” What would the boy think of her new hair color? No need to ask — he’d like anything she did. Ah, Richie,

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she might be less than three years older than you but you are worlds apart.

The girl was absorbed in her art. I don't know if she even saw me look in the door. I would have to chase her out of here and do some glass work soon. But let her paint for now. I remembered girls like Charlie in college, the art student girls, full of themselves and the discovery of their talents. I never dated those girls.

She emerged fairly early. I couldn't use walking her home as an excuse to go over to the motel. Not that I needed excuses anymore. "I should get back to work," she called, poking her head in the front door. "Can't make Mom do all of it. Hi, Richie!"

She was gone before he could manage to say 'hi' back.

"I have a couple of hours to do some glassing," I said. "You watch the shop, okay?"

"Sure. Um, Shaper?"

I turned back to him. "You're, um — Charlie's mom is your girlfriend, right?"

"Yes, she is." I tried not to grin like a fool when I said that. It was hard.

"And you, um, you know —"

I pretty much did. "This is the kind of thing you should be talking to your dad about."

"Oh, I know all that stuff. The nuts and bolts." I hadn't heard it described that way in years. "I just don't know, well, if I — when *do* you know?"

"Are we talking about Cathy?"

"Maybe."

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I sat down on a stack of tee-shirts. "If you're lucky, you know when you're fifty. Before then, it's all guess work."

He gave me a bit of an exasperated look and then chuckled. "Okay, Shaper, it's always hard. I get it."

"If you get it," and I think maybe he did, "then you're way ahead of me at your age."

"You should go over there to her right now," he stated in a serious voice. "You're not getting any younger."

Smart-aleck kid.

Chapter 55

I didn't go over right away but I did as soon as I closed the shop. And I took groceries with me.

I hoped Michelle would take no offense at that. It was just the makings of a mirepoix. How could one cook without those? I laid out onion, carrots, celery on the counter. I could have skipped the celery. Not terribly fond of it.

"Gee, Shaper," said Charlie, "why don't you just move on in?"

"I'm afraid you would put me to work cleaning rooms. Not that I wouldn't do an excellent job."

She snorted in very unladylike manner at that. "Are you making a stew or something?"

"These are the most basic ingredients of French cooking," I announced. "Almost any savory dish can start with these."

"Oh. Well, we *are* part French. Carrol is Irish, isn't it?" She leaned forward on the counter and pondered the vegetables.

"It is. But via French who settled in Ireland."

"You know lots of history."

"Strictly speaking, that's what my college degree is in. But specializing in art history." I was glad she didn't press me on that. My road to getting a degree, even a bachelor's, had seen a lot of detours and delays. I had not graduated beside Pat Edwards.

Michelle came in right about then and gave the groceries a glance. "Hey, good lookin'! Whatcha got cookin'?"

"What's that from?" asked Charlie. "I think I've heard it before."

"Hank Williams," I told her.

"The guy with the sunglasses?"

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“No, dear, his father,” Michelle informed her. “We’re old, remember.”

“Not that old,” I objected. “You weren’t even born yet when Hank died.”

“But my dad loved his music. I heard a lot of Hank Williams when I was a kid.”

“Grampa Joe? I miss him, Mom.”

“Me too, kid, me too.”

I was wondering if I should have brought a knife and a cutting board, too. I didn’t see anything suitable in this kitchen. Move in? Not a chance. Not unless I brought all my stuff with me.

The opposite would work better. Part of me almost wished this motel venture would fail and Michelle and Charlie would come live with me. But Michelle needed to succeed for her own self-esteem, not be taken in when she failed. Not to be pitied.

“I didn’t plan anything for dinner,” Michelle was saying. “Didn’t have time to think about it.”

I stopped looking for a knife. “Let me take you guys out.”

“Oh, Ted, I know you don’t have a lot of extra cash.”

“I budgeted some to take Betty and Pat out. Turned out I didn’t have to use it.”

“Yeah, Mom,” enthused Charlie. “I’m going stir crazy here.”

She gave me a look. “Oh, okay. Are you going dressed like that?”

There was nothing wrong with the way I was dressed. “Yep. This sweatshirt isn’t too stained.” The corduroy jeans were reasonably clean too.

“But we’ll take the van.” Good enough. My truck was over at my

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place, anyway. They took too long to change — typical man complaint, huh? — but we hit the road in about twenty minutes. “You drive,” said Michelle, “since you know where you are taking us.”

Her Dodge minivan was maybe eight, ten years old. It ran, but like my truck, might not one of these days. I’d heard these things ate transmissions. “I used to know a place,” I said, and turned south.

“What’s down this direction?” asked Charlie from the back seat.

“A bunch of towns with ‘beach’ in their names. But we’re not going that far. In fact, here we are.” I pulled into a seafood restaurant on the west side of the road. It still had the same name, *The Fiddler Crab*. That was a good sign.

As was the moderately crowded parking lot. The food would have to be decent to draw this many people on a Tuesday night.

But not so many that we weren’t seated immediately in the dim, wood-paneled dining room. I had remembered that they didn’t serve alcohol here. One of the reasons I thought of this place. “Iced tea for me,” I told the waitress. “How about you girls?”

“We’ll have the same,” said Michelle, not waiting for her daughter to answer. I noticed that they both dumped prodigious quantities of sugar into their glasses when they arrived. Just lemon for me, even if I did grow up in the South.

“Do you think I could get the platter?” Charlie quietly asked her mother. “It’s kind of expensive.”

I nodded my head slightly. “Go ahead,” Michelle told her. “If Shaper has to wash dishes to pay for it all, it’s his own fault.” But she ordered one of the least expensive entrees to make up for it. I

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suspected Michelle would be sampling from her daughter's plate through dinner.

"Broiled scallops for me," I ordered. "Baked potato. And the salad bar." My companions had chosen fries and slaw. More authentic maybe but not my thing.

"This is good," said Charlie. "And so is this." She tried another item from her seafood platter. "How do people make up their minds?"

"You know they just throw the leftovers from other people's plates onto those platters." I think she half-believed for an instant.

"Shaper!" She tried a crab cake. "I don't like that as much." That was exactly what Michelle had ordered.

I was amazed that she actually ate everything on that platter. With a small assist from her mom, of course. No need to carry any leftovers home with us. "It was good Shaper. Thanks," she said.

"Yes, Thanks Ted. It was great to get out for an evening."

I went to the counter. This was going to deplete me pretty well, especially with the tip I had already left behind. Michelle had insisted on adding a couple bucks to that. Yes, we enjoyed the meal, I told the girl at the register.

I turned to leave as someone came in the door, a man with dark curling hair and a young woman on his arm.

"Mom!" hissed Charlie. "That's Ray Manuel."

Chapter 56

He couldn't have missed us but he gave no sign of recognizing my companions. Manuel and his date — and I use the word loosely — were shown to a booth.

So that horse was out of the barn and galloping across the fields. Both women sat in the back seat as I drove home and Michelle quietly filled her daughter in on what little we knew of Manuel and his presence here. "You should have told me," was all that Charlie had to say.

Maybe we should have. Didn't matter now.

But when we got back, she said. "I understand now why you were so upset the other day, Mom. And why Ted thinks he has to escort me everywhere." Had she ever called me Ted before?

"I don't know if I want to stay here anymore. Can't we go someplace where no one can find us?" Charlie started to sob. "I wish you could take us somewhere, Ted."

"I'll be right here, Charlie. I'll take care of you." I could do that, couldn't I? I could try.

"Not with someone like Ray. He would kill you if you got in his way."

"The police are watching too, dear," her mother assured her. "They know all about that man."

And there is a houseful of federal agents right down the road, I thought. But it would be best not to tell them that. "I will let Chief Cotton know I saw him again in the morning."

"Why is he here?" Charlie whispered. "Is it because of me?"

Michelle looked at me. I was going to say it, whether she wanted me to or not. "He's here with your father." The kid should know.

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“Oh. Oh, no, not Dad. Why can’t he keep away from people like that?” She sobbed again but it changed to sniffing in a moment or two. Either cried out or thinking things through.

“They’re planning something, aren’t they? That’s why the police are interested. And then they’ll arrest Dad.”

“He might be better off in custody,” said Michelle.

“Oh sure. You already threw him away.” She ran inside.

Now that she didn’t need to act brave, Michelle began to cry too. “I’m so tired, Ted. Just so damned tired.”

“Let’s go in. I’ll definitely feel better about things if I stay here and keep an eye on you.”

“Not exactly the night together we were hoping for, is it?”

Charlie sat stone-faced on the sofa. “Come on,” said her mom. “Sleep in my room tonight.” Both disappeared into the bedroom. It looked like it would be the sofa-bed for me. How do you open this thing?

Forget it. I’ll just sleep on it like this. Nah. Uncomfortable. I ended up on the floor. I like a firm bed anyway.

“Are you okay, Shaper?” Charlie was on her haunches, looking at me. “You way overslept.”

“Did I?” Where was the clock in here? Oh. After Six.

But then, I hadn’t managed to fall asleep until sometime after Two. I sat up. “I’m fine, kid. How are you?”

“Better.”

“Well, keep that up. Getting better, I mean. And don’t expect me to make sense when I’m waking up.” I need to use the restroom.

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And it shows. Keep this blanket around you, Ted. “Is your mom up?”

“Still snoring.” She did snore a little. I had noticed that. “Bathroom is free if you hurry.”

A minute or so later I was back. I’ll admit I’d been half afraid that Charlie would bolt or something, but she was pouring herself a bowl of cold cereal. “I said stuff I shouldn’t last night,” she said, as she slurped her Cap’n Crunch.

“Better than not saying stuff you should.”

“Maybe. That’s your — what would you call it? A vice?”

“It’s not that bad, girl! A failing, perhaps.”

She nodded her head. “Failing. I like that. Everybody has failings, don’t they?” Charlie smiled for the first time since yesterday evening. “And everybody has feelings.”

“Profound, young lady. Very profound. Is there coffee here?”

“The machine is in the office.” Oh right. I knew that. “I haven’t made any yet.” She turned around and picked up a can of Chock Full O’ Nuts. “You know how,” she said and slid it across the counter to me. “And hurry before Mom wakes up and starts growling.”

Chapter 57

I simply called Bill Cotton and told him about last night. I was sick of playing secret agent for him. Oh, and he took third prize for his chili. Traditional category.

It seemed like things returned to normal. The Christmas decorations went up all over town and a tree appeared in the motel office. “It was already here, in storage,” Michelle told me as I surveyed the ornaments they had arrayed on the rather shoddy artificial spruce.

“When does yours go up?” Charlie had asked me.

“Christmas eve. I am a traditionalist.” I was lying. I hadn’t bothered with a tree in years. But if I did put one up, Christmas eve would be the time. I guess I needed to go buy one.

I did put up garlands and the like in my windows. I’m not Ebenezer Shaper. I sent out cards, mostly to people I did business with. So few personal friends. And pretty much no one with whom I exchanged gifts. None of my relatives. We didn’t keep in touch much.

But now — two ladies for whom I must go shopping. I looked around the shop and smiled. I needn’t go any further than here. Hee-hee, maybe I could unload some of the white elephants that had been sitting unsold.

Just joking. I tell myself pretty funny jokes sometimes. At least I think so but I guess I’m an easy audience.

Agent Field, the field agent — I’ll bet he got that a lot — came over surprisingly soon and asked a few questions about my encounter with Manuel. Very little to say on that, I thought, but he seemed interested by details. Like Ray’s clothes or the woman he was with. I guess those things said something about how much the

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man was settled in here, maybe? He must be staying someplace decent, not sleeping in abandoned buildings like Bradley Jackson almost certainly had been.

I did not care if he was sleeping in a cactus patch, myself.

When he was done, I asked a question of my own. "How the heck did someone like Bob Johns end up in your agency?"

"Oh, Johns was a policeman in England who married an American girl and moved here. I think her family connections got him a chance with us but he does a good job. And the accent comes in handy now and again."

"He's a bit — manipulative, isn't he?"

"You sensed that, huh? Don't mistake him for your friend, Carrol."

Nor you either. "He's a salesman. I deal with them all the time."

"I think salesmen run the world, Mr. Carrol. What's a politician but a glorified salesman?"

"Makes me long for the good old days when we had aristocrats." I was being only slightly facetious.

"One thing to remind you of before I go, sir," he said, as we moved toward the door. "Ray Manuel knows now that he has been recognized by someone here. Up until now, we assume he was unaware. This might or might not put the Jackson women at some risk.

"Just be aware of it and be cautious."

Be cautious. Be *more* cautious he should have said.

I stood on my front step for a minute or so, gazing at the house next door. It still could be worth looking into. I'd have to take a

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mortgage though to buy it, unless the price was ridiculously low. I don't like owing people. Everything I had I owned outright — my building, my truck.

I might be 'Berz' in the water but I'm just not a risk-taker on land.

Anyway, every real estate price was hiked up at this time of year, in anticipation of the influx of Yankees. Maybe if it were still on the market in four or five months. Yeah, wait Ted. You're good at that.

I went and got the tarp I had bought out of the truck. Time to hang it up on the north side of my shower stall. That I had waited way too long on. Silver side in, Ted. You know, you could build a permanent wall instead. Maybe in another ten years.

Or if someone else ever moved in here with me. I would have to make some changes, wouldn't I? No more 'it's good enough' then.

Maybe it was never good enough.

Chapter 58

It was late, almost dark. Too dark to surf but I had sat and gabbed some after leaving the water, with some kids, with a fisherman heading onto the pier for the night, to a pelican that landed near me. I wasn't choosy about my conversations. I would rarely stay so late. It was more than time to head home.

"Shaper! Wait up." Who? It was John from the coffee shop. In his civvies at this time of the evening. "Shaper," he said, "you know the Jackson girl, right?"

"Charlie?"

"Yeah. I think she needs some help." He looked across the street to where a group of young people were being loud and stupid. As young people sometimes are.

We both crossed to them. There was Charlie, her snow-white head standing out in the crowd. She walked over to me, not too steadily.

"Hey, Shaper," she mumbled, laying her head on my shoulder. "Good ol' Shaper-who's-fuckin'-my-mom." It was more than obvious that she was drunk.

"I'm taking you home, Charlie."

"No, man, I wanna hang here."

The young guy who was with her — or thought he was — took a step forward. "Don't try me, kid," was all I said but it seemed to be enough. Having John standing behind me might have helped.

We bundled her into the truck. "Thanks, man," I said, "and I really mean it." Where? Not the motel. Not my place. I pulled in behind the Bells' house.

"Someone needs a place to sleep," I told Kay, as I helped the girl

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in the back door. I hadn't even bothered to knock so I reckon I kind of surprised her.

Kay understood instantly. "Jan's room."

We got her into bed. "Jan should be along shortly. I'll explain to her," said Kay. "And I will call Michelle and tell her Charlie is sleeping over. We won't let her in on what happened."

Good. That would not help either one.

Where had Michelle thought her daughter was? Of course, I realized, she thought she was painting in my workshop. And I hadn't seen her that afternoon so I had assumed she was at the motel when I locked up and headed out to the pier.

I cleaned up a little and went across the street. Charlie had deceived us both. Had she been doing this?

This was probably new, I thought, as I walked. If she had gone that far, gotten that drunk, before, it would have been obvious. That did not mean she had never sneaked away. It did not mean she hadn't had alcohol. It did mean that someone gave her a ride. Just one of those kids, no doubt, not meaning any harm. There were always young people coming and going at the convenience store.

"Hi, Ted," Michelle greeted me. "I hear Charlie went home with Jan."

"She is with Jan, yes." That was true. "Spending the night, I understand."

"That's okay with me. We can do lewd things all over the apartment if we want."

"Want to start now?"

We did break for dinner. And there was no place more comfort-

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able than Michelle's bed. Maybe folks our age shouldn't try to be too adventurous.

I heard a key in the door just I was getting up.

"Hi, Shaper," whispered Charlie, plopping onto the couch. "I was hoping I'd catch you before you left."

"How do you feel?"

"Horrible. And ashamed." She looked up at me. "I think I puked all over Jan's bed. Four months and eight days sober." She shook her head. "And right back where I started."

"You know that you are not, Charlie. Just a little slip on your way up the mountain."

"You have a nice way with words, Shaper. Or Ted. Should I call you Ted?"

She probably could see my smile in the dim light. "I'll answer to either. You're lucky that John and I were there."

"John. He's the guy from the coffee shop, right? He's nice. But sort of a geek."

"I'll tell him you said so. The nice part only, if you prefer." How much older was he than Charlie? About two years? No, only one. Jan's age. 'Matchmaker, Matchmaker' went through my head. "He's a surfer too."

"Mmm, I knew that. Didn't I? I need some coffee. Do you think he would bring me some?"

"You'll have to settle for mine." I wouldn't be grabbing my morning walk right now. That was okay.

"Oh," Charlie said. "Jan is outside." I nodded.

Sure enough, the Bell girl was waiting patiently. "Good morning,

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Jan. Walked our friend over?" I poured water into the coffee maker. There was a little sink here in the office.

"Yes, Shaper." She watched me measure out the coffee and start the machine before speaking again. "That was scary, Shaper. There is so much I haven't seen in this world."

Never been around anyone really drunk? No, I suppose she wouldn't have. I hadn't at her age. "I think Charlie will be all right. But this is something that will be a danger for her all her life."

"I don't think I want to be a teacher anymore. I'm going to do something to help people like Charlie. Like be a psychologist or a social worker or a minister."

That last one took me by surprise as the Bells were decidedly nondenominational. "A minister, Janice?"

"Yes, God helps people, right?" She was searching, that was for sure. "Do you believe in prayer, Shaper? Do you think God will intervene?"

"Oh, I believe that God does intervene, but he intervenes through us."

"It's kind of all the same, isn't it?"

"I think so. You'd best run on home while I pour coffee into our Charlie."

Chapter 59

It was Bradley Jackson. He was not in good shape, not good at all.

His words came rushing out. “The girls saw something — someone — they shouldn’t have. They can’t say anything about it. You gotta tell ’em not to say anything.”

I didn’t hesitate. Honesty was absolutely the best policy at that moment. “The police know Ray Manuel is here. They’ve known for weeks.”

“Oh shit.” He stared at me. “Oh shit.”

“It would be best if you two just got out of here. Forget this place and go.”

“Too late, man. Too late. Ray has plans. Plans. An’ I gotta help. I gotta, man. Said he’d hurt Shell. An’ Charlotte. I gotta keep him away from Charlotte.” Damned right you do.

“I can’t go. It’s my big payday. The big one. Can’t let that get away.” He took a step toward me. “Don’t let him hurt Charlotte, man.”

I thought he was going to grab hold of me so I backed away. Brad meant me no harm, I’m sure, but I didn’t want his hands on me. Physically, I outmatched this strung-out junkie. But he was a strung-out junkie, and desperate. Brad Jackson was dangerous right then.

“I say, sir, are you open for business?” No mistaking that British accent.

Jackson looked at him and turned and bolted for my back fence. Lots of places he could slip through. Probably how he got in, for that matter. I saw Agent Field push his way through the hedge.

Johns held up his palm and shook his head. “No sense in running

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after him.” Field nodded, gave us both a look, and disappeared again. I hoped he didn’t get too scratched up. “We need to talk, Ted,” said Bob Johns.

“Okay. A moment —” I looked into the shower stall. It was littered with cigarette butts. Brad might have sheltered in there all night, waiting for me. Slept probably. That tarp didn’t seem like such a great idea now. “I guess I need to broom this out.”

The agent looked over my shoulder. “It’s odd how we focus on little things like that when we’ve just had a crisis.”

“Oh, I know the psychology, Bob. I suppose you want to hear all about it.”

“If you’re ready. Too bad Jackson ran.” He pursed his lips. “I don’t think he made me.”

I doubted it too. “Come on into the kitchen,” I told him. I would let Agent Johns in this time. Might as well. “Would you like some coffee? Or tea — you are English, after all.” Meant jokingly and I am sure he recognized it.

“Hate the swill. Coffee would be fine.” I got the coffee maker going while he sat at my round kitchen table. I did not use the better grind.

“You are arriving home rather late,” the agent commented. It was a bit past Seven. That was late for me, wasn’t it?

“I had a different crisis to deal with,” I said. “Nothing to do with this.” Not directly. “Did you guys — you agents — know Jackson was there waiting?”

“Yes, we saw him slip in late last night.” He took the cup I

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handed him. "We were going to keep our distance but it looked like you might need a bit of an assist there."

"Thanks for that. Milk?" I asked. "Sugar?"

He took a sip before answering. "Milk," he decided. I set the jug on the table and let him serve himself. I used plenty of milk too.

"We thought it would be best if we let him make contact with you." There was the hint of a smile. "Our Agent Field was lamenting that he hadn't planted any listening devices over here."

"You would have gotten some great recordings of me singing in the shower."

"No doubt. Tell me a tale, Ted." I wondered if the alliteration was intentional

And I gave him everything I could remember, including me revealing that the authorities knew about Manuel's presence.

"It's quite all right for you to have spilled the beans, so to speak. I believe I might have done the same. You were protecting the women. May I pour myself another cup?" I nodded and he got up.

"A big payday," he said, perhaps to himself, as he sat down again. "Pretty much what we surmised."

"They are smuggling, right?" It seemed the only logical answer.

"I would think so, Ted. Heroin, most likely." He poured more milk. "Have you ever known anybody in the, um, import business?"

"Unfortunately, yes." It was a long time ago, wasn't it? "Mostly just guys bringing in pot. When I was a kid."

"Not such a lucrative business anymore. Too much homegrown product available."

I knew this. "And I knew guys later who almost certainly ran in

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cocaine. Guys with fast boats down in Lauderdale and Miami. But that was not at all my scene.” I chuckled. “Except for the boats. Loved the boats.”

“Ah, the *Miami Vice* thing.” I had to laugh out loud at that. Yeah, that was exactly what it was. “It would have been interesting to be there. I was still on the chilly streets of London.”

“I think there might be a pastel sports jacket hanging in the back of my closet.”

It was Bob’s turn to laugh. But not for long. “Then you know men like these are dangerous. I know you care about, um, Michelle and her daughter. It might be just as well if you could get them out of town.”

Charlie would leave in an instant, if I suggested it, but Michelle was stubborn. There was no way she was giving up her chance at the motel.

“I’ll give it a try.”

Chapter 60

But I wouldn't give it a try. I knew there was no point. And there was no way I was going to tell either Jackson woman about my encounter with Bradley. The phone rang around Eight.

"Hi, Mr. Carrol, it's John Brody. From the coffee place."

"John. Hi, man. Are you at work?"

"Yeah. I wanted to find out if Charlie was okay."

"She's doing well. You were a lifesaver, man. I mean it."

"Um, sure, Shaper. Mr. Carrol."

"Make it Ted. That's what my adult friends call me."

"Okay." I heard him briefly talk to someone in the coffee shop.

"And you can come by here yourself and see how she is if you want."

"Oh. Umm —"

"Just come into the shop sometime. There's a reasonable chance of running into the girl."

"Okay. Gotta go, Ted."

"Goodbye," I said, "and thanks again." I had done my part to promote young love. Darn, that kid was nearly as shy as I was at his age. They used to call him John-boy when he hung at the beach, didn't they? I'd just remembered that.

I should see how Kay was after last night's events. I definitely wanted to thank her too. We take our neighbors — our friends — for granted sometimes. Rick's truck is here, I noted, as I crossed into their backyard. He opened the door and let me in before I had a chance to knock.

"You're a good man, Ted. You did a good thing last night."

"So I'm not just that eccentric guy down the street?"

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"That too. That's why we all love you," said Kay. "Coffee?" There were cups on the table.

"Had enough this morning. I'm not the only one who did good things. Thanks for taking care of Charlie."

I sank onto a chair. Felt tired all of a sudden. Ha, adrenaline and caffeine wearing off.

"Jan did too. More than me." She gave me a bit of a weary smile. "My main job was to keep Richie from getting too curious. I told him Charlie had a bad headache but I am not positive he bought it."

She really did have a headache when I had seen her this morning. "He's not a dummy," I said.

"No, he's a bright kid," agreed Rick. "Must get it from his mom."

"Pat left a couple of lovely new paintings with us," said Kay, in a sudden change of subject. "Took away the one that hadn't sold."

Rick got up. "Maybe you will have better luck with these ones. I need to go to work."

"This late?" I wondered.

"Took a job on my own," he replied. "No time-clock." Rick would never think like a businessman. Out the door he went.

"I'd love to have a real gallery," said Kay. "Not just a few paintings among all the other stuff."

"Art galleries are a truly risky sort of business."

"I know. Do you think this town could even support a serious one?"

"Hmm, no, probably not." But what did I know? "Isn't there a swanky sort of place in Banner Beach?"

"People actually have money up there." She got up and rinsed

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her cup. "Time to hang out the open sign." Kay opened up an hour earlier than I did. Different sort of business, different sort of customers.

I considered going back across the street, checking again. No, don't hover, Ted. "I'm going to head back to my place," I said. "Sell lots of stuff!"

And back to my place I did head. This week had rushed by. It was Friday, wasn't it? I thought through the days in my head. Right. Another weekend nearly upon us.

Christmas nearly upon us.

There would be a spate of moms and dads buying new surfboards for their little darlings. One of the best times of the year for board sales. Maybe the best time, period. I could look in my records but it wasn't important.

I went ahead and opened my door too. Nice enough to leave it open.

Charlie wandered in a couple hours later and settled herself on the floor next to the counter. Looking up at me, she said, "I talked to my sponsor. You know about him now, don't you? Mom told me." She giggled. "Did you and Jan really think he might be my boyfriend?"

"Jan didn't. I wasn't so sure."

"Shaper!" She shook her head at me. "Anyway, part of AA is making amends so I want to say I'm sorry for deceiving you." She pondered a moment. "I need to apologize to Mom, too. That's gonna be harder."

"You know she will understand."

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“Yeah, she always does. She should have beat me more as a child. Then maybe I wouldn’t be so messed up.”

“Belts are right over there. Feel free to take one home.”

“No need. I think maybe I’ll get a lump of coal and a switch for Christmas. It’s what I deserve.”

“Can the self-pity, Charlie. I know that’s not part of your recovery. And, you know, I think maybe Christmas is about getting better than we deserve”

“I sure hope so, Shaper.”

Chapter 61

It was good to fall once more into my routine. I walked onto the dark beach and looked out over the Atlantic. No waves, or none worth bothering with. Especially not on a weekend.

I turned to go home. What was that in the shadow of the wall? I walked over to investigate, not sure that it was the best of ideas. Pull out that little flashlight, Ted. The one on your key-chain.

Oh, hell. Not again. Don't touch anything. This needs batteries, doesn't it? Those clothes — I shone the feeble beam onto the dead man's face. Bradley Jackson.

I pretty much ran back home, hoping that Charlie wouldn't wander out onto the beach before I could get hold of the police. I would have been glad to see even Officer Redding in his patrol car right then.

Dispatch. I explained it as tersely and as calmly as I could. Yes, I will go back over there and wait for the officers to arrive.

Which was not long at all. Two patrol cars. An ambulance shortly after. A little late for that. The flashing lights surely woke Michelle and Charlie and a good portion of the motel guests. That wouldn't help business. Here came both women.

Dave Blake. He was the man to talk to. "I need to go head them off," I told him. "That's your man's daughter. And ex-wife."

He nodded. "Someone will certainly want to speak with them later. You, too."

I hopped up onto the retaining wall and hurried to the pair. "You don't want to go down there," I confided to Michelle. "It's Bradley."

An intake of breath. "How?"

"Looks like an OD." Not that I knew anything.

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Charlie was staring toward the scene, the blanket-covered body. "Daddy?" She had figured it out on her own somehow.

"Yes, Charlotte," said Michelle, wrapping her daughter in her arms. "Let's not stay out here." She escorted the sobbing girl back toward the motel office. I decided it best not to follow.

Here came the chief in his Explorer. "We need to quit meeting like this, Ted," he quipped. I did not smile. "Yeah, that wasn't funny, was it? Hang around and I'll talk to you later."

It was just starting to get light enough to see things well. I looked over the dwindling crowd of the curious that had gathered. Many had returned to their rooms, I assumed. There was Agent Field among them, being fairly successful at remaining inconspicuous. I wouldn't blow his cover.

But he casually made his way to where I was sitting on the wall and squatted down to speak. "You have all the bad luck, don't you Carrol?"

I shrugged. "It's just random chance."

"That's what luck is." I suppose so. We sometimes think that two words mean different things when they don't. They're just different words. "I think I may have to step out of the shadows here and help Cotton with his investigation."

"He's a good guy but out of his depth," I answered. I could see that. Field sat down beside me.

"Damn, this concrete is cold." He gazed toward the men hovering around the body. "Jackson stopped here and talked to his daughter last night. I saw the two of them standing by this road. Then she went in and he went down onto the beach and I lost

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sight.” He turned to me. “This was through binoculars, you understand. I wasn’t near and I wasn’t going to follow the man into the dark.”

Field nodded in the direction of the ocean. “He must have shot up right there on the beach. Who knows? Maybe he meant to kill himself.”

I thought it was possible.

Bill Cotton came over about then and gave my companion an uncertain look. “It’s all right, Chief Cotton. I need to make myself known here.”

“Okay. I reckon you know best, Agent. Ready to make a statement, Ted?” I did, not that there was anything to tell. Field barely seemed to be paying attention to us.

“Mind if I look at the body?” he asked the chief when it seemed we were through.

“Okay. I’m done here.” Bill rose but still faced me. “I suspect you’ll want to come along when we talk to the wife and daughter.” It sounded like he might not want me.

“He should be there,” said Field. “He should definitely be there. We’ll be right back,” he told me and followed Bill Cotton. I saw him lift the blanket, look for maybe thirty seconds, and nod his head.

“I was just making sure it was accidental,” he said when both returned. “You don’t know when men like Ramon Manuel are involved.” I wondered how he could tell. No, no, I didn’t want to know.

“The question,” said Field, as we walked toward the office, “is whether he had the chance to tell Manuel that we knew about him.”

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“It’s too late to keep this death quiet now,” Chief Cotton told him. “Do you think it might make your man abandon his plans?”

“If something big is in motion, the death of a junkie would not stop it. But they might have to adjust their plan some.”

Michelle made an announcement as soon as we were in the office. “Before you start, Charlie has something to tell you.” She turned to the girl, seated beside her on the avocado-green vinyl couch. “Go ahead.”

Charlie stared at us all for a few seconds before beginning. “Dad came by last night.” She paused and gazed at the floor. “Yeah, you know that. You know that —”

“Take your time, Miss,” said Agent Field.

She gulped and continued. “He said he needed my help and we could leave Mom out of it.” A quick sidelong glance at Michelle. “All they needed was a room. Just a room where — where they could leave some things for a while and come back for them later without anyone knowing or asking anything.

“And if I helped him with this they would go away and we’d never see them again. He just needed to make a little money, enough to go somewhere and start over. Like we did, Mom.” Tears. She couldn’t hold them back any longer. “Now he can’t. Now he can’t.”

Our two law enforcement representatives held a whispered conference. “Thank you, Charlotte,” said the chief. “We’ll talk with you some more later, okay?”

She nodded her head.

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I followed the pair outside. I was going to be a part of this as long as they let me. "So, a transfer point," said Bill.

"I don't see how they could have hidden it from Michelle," I said.

"I have no doubt he just said that to get her to agree. Once their product was in the room, she would have little choice but to go along." Field made sense. Michelle would fear that Charlie would be charged. Or that she would be charged. And it would definitely mean an end to their dream of running this place.

"Why here?" asked Bill. "I mean, I understand choosing this particular motel. They had an in here, thanks to Bradley. But it doesn't seem, well, convenient."

"The beach?" I asked.

"Maybe," Field said. "Likely, even." He looked out toward the Atlantic. "We're away from the downtown lights here, away from the pier. But still in town where no one would pay attention to vehicles at the beach and people moving about."

"Especially not at this time of year," agreed Chief Cotton.

"Bring it ashore at night, small boat, and stow it in a motel room. Send it out later. Lots of cars come and go at a motel."

The scenario Agent Field had laid out was attractive. It might even be accurate.

Neither man said anything more. But I was thinking the obvious. "Ray Manuel needs to think this is still all on, doesn't he? You need to have Charlie play along."

Chapter 62

“Enough of us have identified Jackson,” said Bill Cotton. “The women won’t need to look at the body.” The earthly remains of Bradley Charles Jackson were being loaded into the back of the medical examiner’s vehicle. There wasn’t much to those remains, the wasted husk of another junkie.

I was ready to tell Charlie to have nothing to do with policemen and federal agents. Let them catch their own criminals. Michelle would certainly agree with me.

But Agent Johns, who had joined us, had a way with words and they would not let me be there when he used them. Worse, Charlie was an adult, eighteen-years-old, and her mother could not forbid anything.

“Ray is responsible for Dad’s death,” the girl said when she spoke to me later. “I know, not directly. I blame him anyway. I’m gonna put him in jail.” She was determined.

Yeah, Johns was persuasive.

Now, Michelle certainly could have refused to play along and allow the use of the motel. I suggested as much. Maybe Charlie was persuasive too.

Things sort of went back to normal. And that was intentional. No police hanging around. None obviously. Motel guests coming and going. Even me coming and going. Nothing would look out of the ordinary if Ray Manuel chose to make contact.

Maybe he never would. Maybe he would find a different spot, different people to coerce.

“We know where the man is staying,” Agent Johns told me the next day. He and Field had been coming through the hedge now

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and again, enough to create an obvious opening. They had a better vantage from here, I suppose, but I think they mostly came over to gab. Field had his bugs planted over at the motel, anyway. Probably not in useful spots but he had made an effort.

Anyway — Ray Manuel. “He and a couple other men are renting a trailer in the sticks, as you so quaintly put it in this country, about half way out to Scott City. We followed the trail from the motel he first stayed in. That took a good bit of canvassing.”

I doubted he was the one who had done the work. Surely there were other agents around that I had not seen. “But there’s nothing you can charge him with, right?”

“Possibly, but it wouldn’t be worth the while.”

And Charlie, poor Charlie, would have to go out of the way to show herself. I knew she was aching. I knew this was the sort of thing that could knock her off the wagon.

“Let’s go surfing,” I said to her, on Sunday morning. “Get your body-board and we’ll go up to the pier.”

“The water is mighty cold, Ted,” she objected. She was calling me that more frequently now. Maybe because she heard her mother say it all the time.

“And I have a shop full of wetsuits to lend you.”

“Okay. I’ll tell Mom.” Who did not object. But then, I had already cleared it with her.

“I haven’t surfed at the pier before. Now I’ll be part of the in-crowd,” giggled Charlie.

“A true surf-rat,” I told her as we headed down the stairs toward the waves. Those waves were indifferent but rideable. Especially

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the shorebreak where Charlie would probably spend all her time anyway.

“I want to walk out to the end of the pier sometime,” she said and took to the water.

I could take her out there, I thought, as I paddled my own board to the outer break. Or better yet, get John to do it. Of course I intended to take her over to get hot coffee when we finished here. Of course. You had figured that one out, hadn’t you?

“Oh, hot chocolate. I want hot chocolate,” said Charlie when we settled into chairs later. Inside, so John couldn’t escape us. We had him cornered. I hadn’t been certain he even had a shift today.

He served. He hovered, some. John — I almost slipped and called him John-boy — was too shy to actually flirt but Charlie helped him along. We were about ready to go, when, out of the blue, he asked, “Do you like puppies?”

She couldn’t stop laughing. “Everyone likes puppies, John. If they don’t they are evil!”

“We have new puppies at our place.” I knew he lived with his folks, out a way in the country.

Charlie became wistful. “I haven’t had a dog since I was eight. I’ve wished I did lots of times since.” She tilted her head at him. “Could I see them?”

“You could have one.” Ah, this boy knew the way to a girl’s heart after all.

A grimace. “I don’t think it would be safe at the motel. But I still want to see them,” she proclaimed, brightening up.

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John looked at me, as if waiting for a go-ahead. "Could I maybe, um, pick you up this afternoon to go see them?"

Darned if Charlie didn't give me the same permission-asking look. I'm not either one's parent!

"You know your mother won't mind if you play hooky from work, kid. Tell him 'yes.'" Hadn't she ordered me to say 'yes' not so long ago?

"Yes."

It would have been hard to wipe that smile off his face. It was just too big. "I get off at Two. Is that okay?"

"Uh-huh."

She smiled some, too, as I drove us home.

But Michelle was not smiling. When Charlie went into the apartment to get cleaned up, she pulled me aside. "Ray Manuel was here," she whispered.

Chapter 63

“Have you told anyone?”

“I was waiting for you. I thought he or one of his men might be watching, too.”

I should have seen it. The agents and the police should have seen it. It was silly to think that he would contact Charlie now. Michelle was the vulnerable one.

And I could guess his exact move. “He threatened Charlie, didn’t he?”

She was astonished, or almost. “How did you know?”

“It was the obvious move for him. Everyone should have known.”

“If you say so. He didn’t give me any details, just said he would be in touch again.” She looked lost. “How do I protect Charlie, Ted?”

“Sending her far away would be the only solution. And she would refuse.” I sighed. This was too much, wasn’t it? I’m just a simple surfboard shaper. “It’s past time I usually open up. I’d better go over and act normal — and pass this along to the agents.”

Johns already knew. “We saw Manuel. He did not go near any of Field’s listening devices, unfortunately. Waylaid her in the laundry room.”

“There apparently was not a whole lot to hear. Threats against the girl and orders to wait for further instructions.”

“Ah. Charlie is his leverage. Of course.” So he saw it too. It wasn’t just me who thought like a criminal.

I puttered around the shop a while, killing time mostly. It was hard to get my head into starting on anything. I was practically ecstatic to see Jan step through the doorway to take over.

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Back to the motel in time to catch Charlie's semi-date.

I pulled the kid aside. "John, I need you to be very careful with Charlie."

"I, uh, know about her drinking problem, sir. Just so you know I'm aware. And I heard about her father."

"Let me guess. Jan Bell?" He nodded.

I had mentioned the boy to her, she had volunteered that he took classes at the community college. That was probably all it took. Ha, maybe I was matchmaking the wrong couple.

"Okay. But there are some bad people out there who might hurt Charlie. Stay away from crowds if you can and keep your eyes open." I was almost ready to tell him to go home, to be honest.

"I'll do my best."

"Yeah, I know you will. The problem is that Charlie may not. It might be hard to keep her reined in."

He gave me a sly smile. "If eight puppies can't keep her put a while, I don't know what would."

"Have you decided which one is the heir of the dog?" It was worth it to hear the boy groan, before the pair rolled away in his pickup truck. Even older than mine.

We would have to fill Charlie in on how things had changed. Let her enjoy an afternoon out first. An afternoon of worry for me!

For Michelle too. But I couldn't hang around at the motel. That wouldn't look right, even if Manuel knew I was her boyfriend. I wonder if he had sent any threats my direction. She probably wouldn't have told me if he did.

I was surprised to see Jan huddled with Agent Field when I

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returned to the shop. "Hey, Shaper," she called. "What would you think of me as a federal agent?"

"From minister you go to this? That's some career change, my girl."

"Have to explore my options."

"It's a way to make a difference," said Field.

"So is everything else," I countered.

"Point for Shaper," chimed Jan.

"Okay. But you do have to admit we have some nifty gadgets." I figured the van parked in front of their rented house held some of them.

"I think we should plant a bug in here to find out what Shaper does when he's alone," said Miss Bell.

"That's when I cast spells. Did you think it was just by accident your dad caught that cold last month?"

Jan turned to the agent. "Is there a federal statute against doing that?"

"How did you think we agents solve most of our cases?" Agent Field was okay. "Anything going on I should know about?" he asked me.

"Nothing new. I must admit, I'm a little apprehensive about letting Charlie go off on a date."

"I wouldn't worry about it. It will make things seem more normal over there too."

"A date? Who is it? Oh, John-boy, right?"

"Yes, Jan. But I don't think we should call him that anymore. They are going out to his parents' farm. To look at puppies!"

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“A farm, you say?” Field was suddenly interested. “Whereabouts?”

“Do you know, Jan?” I just knew it was a couple miles over the bridge.

“About, what, two-and-a-half miles past the bridge? Just past the *Winn-Dixie* and then north less than a mile. It’s not really a farm, just like five acres in the country.”

“That’s rather close to where our, ah, friend is holed up.” Jan wasn’t really in on any of this, nor should she be. But there was way too much going on to keep it all hidden from her and her family.

Now I was more worried than ever. And remained so until John safely deposited Charlie back at the motel.

Chapter 64

“Yes, they were cute. And so is he. Enough questions, Mom!” Charlie sighed. “I do wish we could have one though. The Bells have dogs.”

“But not a busy parking lot,” I pointed out. “I had a cat when I first moved here. Never replaced it when it passed on.” Or disappeared, as cats tend to do.

“Then you should have a puppy, Shaper.” She’d gone back to that name.

“Ted is too cheap to feed a dog,” her mother confided to her, in a much too loud whisper. She was right, though. Dogs are an expense.

“He’s feeding us!” She had us there. I had fixed dinner this evening. It was the long-threatened beans. Okay, split peas in truth. Beans would have taken too long.

Michelle gave me a look, a look I had been expecting. I nodded. “It’s time to bring you up to date, dear,” she told Charlie. “Ray Manuel came by today.”

The girl remained expressionless. “Was he looking for me?”

“No. He thinks your mother is an easier target,” I said.

“He threatened to hurt you if I didn’t help with his plan,” added Michelle.

“I might hurt him if I see him,” growled Charlie. I quite believed it. “John’s family has a shit-load of guns. I should ask for one.”

I almost couldn’t keep myself from laughing. “Leave it to the agents,” I told her. “They are up to date.” Should I mention that she had been close to Ray’s — what, hideout? that seemed a bit melo-

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dramatic. Ray's gang in their hideout. Shades of Thirties gangster movies. No, better not. I'd already mentioned it to Michelle.

Things almost seemed normal. Normal enough that we were all comfortable with me never leaving that evening.

And I was comfortable with my routine morning walk. However, I was not alone in the predawn darkness. A man, balding, and dressed entirely inappropriately for a cold December morning, was standing across the road. This had to be one of Manuel's associates.

I pretended that I had no idea who he was and passed by with a friendly nod. Back to the motel or over to my place as I normally might? I chose the former.

Let them think Michelle had said nothing to me, that I was just some casual boyfriend kept out of the loop. That is what I was hoping. Of course, Michelle was still asleep when I slipped into the apartment but Charlie was stirring.

"Back?" She was surprised to see me. And immediately suspicious. "Something going on?"

"A stranger watching the place." I had no doubt our federal watchdogs were howling to each other right now. They would surely have seen him. "Hey, agents," I said, "did you put a bug in here? There's a really ugly guy out front!"

Charlie snickered. "I don't think they got one into this room. Bet there's one in the office though."

I shared that suspicion. "Manuel had enough sense to talk to your mom in the noisy laundry room. Do you think maybe he suspected something?"

"It would prevent ordinary eavesdropping too. Ray was always

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cautious about that sort of thing.” That’s right, she knew the man pretty well.

I was feeling beaten down by all this. It must be worse for Charlie and Michelle. “I just hope this is over and done with by Christmas. If not, I’m putting you and your mom in my truck and going somewhere else!” Christmas — just a week away now.

“Aw, poor Shaper. It’s not much fun lately, is it?” Her voice brightened up. “But yesterday was fun. The most fun I’ve had in ages. Thanks for taking me surfing.” She giggled. “And thanks for John.”

“He was easy to deliver. He practically packaged himself up and stuck on an address label.”

“I don’t think he’s my type, though. Not anywhere near my type.”

“Yeah, but he did have puppies. That must count for something.”

“I’ll admit they helped his cause.” She slowly shook her head. “I’m too messed up for anyone. Who could put up with me? I mean for — for very long.”

“Don’t think about for very long. Shoot for forever. I’m finally doing that.”

“But you’re a great guy, Shaper. You deserve someone great. Or Mom.” She thought that was pretty funny. I guess it was, too.

“I never saw myself that way. I always thought I was never good enough. Broken, maybe.”

“Oh, man. I didn’t know we belonged to the same club.”

“Inadequates Anonymous.”

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“We’ll have to start a chapter. You sponsor me and I’ll sponsor you.”

“Okay. If we’re going to hold a meeting, I’d better go make coffee.”

She followed me into the office. “How are your other meetings going?”

“Good, Shaper. But this one is more fun.” She sat down on one of the chairs, its splitting vinyl patched with a strip of duct tape. “Seriously, they are good. I’m good.”

She frowned. “But in all this turmoil I never got around to telling Mom about what happened and apologizing to her. I wonder if I should now.”

“If you have to wonder then you need to do it.”

“Damn, Shaper, that’s not what I wanted to hear! Why do you have to appeal to my better side?”

“I’ve looked in the mirror a lot and could never decide which of my sides is better.”

“The left. Your beard is not quite so scroungy there.”

This was actually true. I was surprised she had noticed.

“It’s starting to lighten up out. I don’t see our guy.”

“Me neither. Coffee’s ready.”

Chapter 65

“This doesn’t mean he won’t communicate with you as well,” said the agent. “He would gladly threaten each of you with the other’s safety.”

Charlie listened to this wordlessly, toying with a strand of her bleached hair. The dark roots were quite visible now. What was she thinking? Only of hatred for Ray Manuel, who had perhaps come to represent all that had once been wrong with her life?

He was just another small-time criminal, Charlie. Things do not always have a black and white explanation, even though we wish them to. I have learned this. Learned that stuff is sometimes simply random and messy and meaningless — perhaps more often than we would like to admit.

“Okay,” she said at last. “I’m gonna go paint, Shaper.” Out the back she went, headed for my workrooms. Charlie should probably be helping her mother at the motel on a Monday, but Michelle saw fit to give her a break. Maybe she was too understanding.

Bob Johns’s eyes had followed her to the door. Now they turned to me. “Did she understand me, Ted?”

“Completely. You can count on that.”

“I suppose I shall have to. Can you describe the man you saw this morning?”

“On the short side of medium height. Sort of yellowish complexion though that might have been from the lighting. Balding. What was left of his hair was dark and wavy and greased back. Maybe curly hair that had been straightened.” Bob nodded at that. “A bit paunchy. Round-faced.” I narrowed my eyes a moment as I tried to concentrate. “Or bloated, perhaps.” I’d seen that look on

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people with kidney problems. I'd seen it on my father. "Snub nose and small mouth. Sort of puckered-up looking. A really ridiculous pencil mustache."

"That's pretty good, Ted. Tell me, do you actually, um, take a picture of the man in your head.?"

"No. As soon as I see someone, I am writing a description. I need the words to get the face into my memory."

"Ah, one of those." He did not explain that remark. "It's not actually important since we know who he is. And, yes, he is one of Ramon Manuel's henchmen. Oh, you like that word!"

He had seen a little smile come. "It's a pretty good one," I admitted.

"I rather like it. I've certainly taken up enough of your time, sir, and I suspect you want to let customers into here." He scratched at his head of short sandy-blond hair. "I do hope we get this affair over with soon. If only we could get a date out of Manuel. I'll, um, let myself out the back."

We hadn't really been waiting that long when you thought about it. But I definitely did want this over before Christmas. I should go shopping for the girls when I got a chance.

Not today though. Business was pretty decent and would get better as we approached the holiday. Charlie didn't stay long — just needed a little break, maybe. I also got the impression she had plans of some sort for later. Her mother took her own break and came over around noon. I was out back working on a board by then. Repair work, the worst of all parts of running a surf shop. Or so it felt when I was doing it.

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Michelle came and put her arms around me, holding tight, saying nothing for at least a minute. "Charlie told me how you picked her up when she fell," she said at last.

"I am glad she finally said something to you about it."

"She apologized. I'm sure she felt better for doing it." She released me and stepped back to look me in the eyes. "And you never hinted of any of it. Nor Kay."

"It was up to Charlie to tell you."

"Yes, it was." I was pretty glad we were in agreement on that. A bit relieved too. "She is seeing puppy-boy again. I think we will have to call it a real date this time."

"His name is John. John Brody."

"Janice called him John-boy."

"Most of the kids who hang at the beach live within walking distance of it and a country boy like John was a rarity. That's why the other surfers took to calling him that. I think maybe he was a little proud of the name."

"But it is a tad mean, isn't it? Kids are like that and they don't even think about it."

"Maybe. Some of the surf-rats have picked up far worse nick-names."

"Like Shaper? Or what was the one Rick mentioned? Buzz?" She sounded doubtful. As she should since she had it wrong.

"Berz," I corrected her. "I'm not going to explain that one again."

"I'll find out some other way," she promised. Was there something else on her mind?

"What's up?" I asked. "Is anything wrong?"

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A sigh. "There have been cancellations and complaints since the incident. Since — Bradley. The owners are concerned about bad publicity and how I'm running things here."

Already? "You aren't falling behind, are you? On your payments?" I wouldn't think it likely. Business still seemed good.

"Oh, no, we're all right there. Until things slow down after the season. Who knows how it will go then?" She had nothing more to say on that. "Coming over later? Before more tourist swarms descend on the motel?"

"I don't remember that as one of the plagues in *Exodus*."

"You're a bible reader, Ted?"

"Nah, just a movie watcher."

Chapter 66

“John was going to take me all the way out to the end of the pier. I didn’t know they charged for that, Shaper. I wouldn’t have asked.

“And there was Ray. He had one of his boys with him so I told John to be cool. I think he would have taken them both on.” She liked the kid, didn’t she?

“Ray gave me some crap about being sorry about Dad. Ooh, I wanted to tear the eyes right out his head!” Charlie could be scary. “He got right to the threats and said I had better follow through on the things Dad had told me about. He threatened Mom and me, but not — not —” She was trying to come up with a word. “Overtly.” It was a pretty good word when she found it.

“And he even threatened John and his family! He said he knew where they lived. They aren’t even part of this. Oh, I hate him, Shaper. I hate him!”

I sort of wondered how Ray and his two thugs would actually fare against the Brody family and their ‘shit-load of guns.’

“John brought me right home but he wasn’t scared. He said you had warned him about something like this.” Now she turned just a little bit of that anger toward me. “You shouldn’t have let him put himself in danger.”

Michelle would have none of that. “Remember who is the bad guy here,” she said. “Don’t blame Ted for any of this.”

“No, I won’t. Sorry, Shaper.” She smiled impishly. “If you had kept John from taking me out he wouldn’t have been able to kiss me goodbye.”

Good for you, John-boy. “This is certainly something we should tell to someone official.”

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“Not the part about the kiss,” said Charlie.”Just so we’re clear on that.”

“I don’t want either of you walking out of here again this evening,” Michelle told us. “You can talk to your agents or police chief or whomever in the morning.” She turned to me. “Oh, and I’m making dinner tonight, Ted. No vegetable chopping for you. I keep fearing a finger will turn up among the carrots.”

“Those feds spend half their time hanging around Shaper’s shop anyway,” Charlie said. “It won’t be hard to find one. Hey, Shaper, what color do you think I should dye my hair?”

I surprised both of us by having a ready answer. “Red and green for the Christmas season.”

“Do not encourage that girl, Mr. Carroll!” came from Michelle. But I am afraid it was too late.

It was rainy in the morning, not that I would cancel my customary walk for that. Not unless it was a hurricane or something. I remained a man of routine.

Though it had been disrupted rather thoroughly lately. Nothing happening in the misted darkness, no lurking strangers, no bodies to discover! Waves? Yes, but not worth going out on a day like this.

I headed to my own place. Michelle had come to expect this and probably was happy not to have me underfoot when she arose. And I was happy not to be underfoot. Would we actually be able to share the same space if it ever came to that?

Maybe but it would have to be a considerably larger space, I decided. It could even be good for me, couldn’t it? I had been by

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myself long enough, appearing to have an enviable carefree life but actually weary of it much of the time.

Even ennui gets boring after a while. I had been very bored for a very long time, hadn't I?

Into my boring kitchen I went, in my boring house, with the boring surf shop up front. I had to smile to myself at that thought. Not so boring lately. And it was a good life, really. A different event here and there and I could have been the one who lived and died like Bradley Jackson. Not the drugs, though. I'm pretty sure I'm just not wired for that sort of addiction.

No, I was addicted to my depression, to my negative thoughts, my self-doubt. That, I would always live with, just as Charlie would live with her alcoholism. We would live our fragile existences and hope they held together.

Ah, coffee. I had brewed the good stuff this morning. I deserved it, yes, I did, I told myself. I had to laugh out loud.

This would be a good morning to go Christmas shopping, before opening up the shop. But I needed to talk to the federal agents over there in their house first. I wondered if I might slip through the hedge and go knock on their door.

It wasn't getting very light out yet. Too much cloud cover. I couldn't hear the rain in here but it would be rattling on the roof out in my work rooms.

Hmm, a message or two on the answering machine. "Are you open?" No, I wasn't, Mystery Caller. That one came in shortly after I closed yesterday. Pat. Nothing but hello-and-I'll-call-back-later from him. He probably had a good idea of where I had been.

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I sat there and thought of where I had been, of the mingled feelings of peace and satisfaction and worry and hope that would run through me as Michelle lay slumbering at my side. I still had trouble sleeping there.

A rap on my back door. I glanced at the clock. Almost Nine. How had it gotten so late? I might have to cancel my shopping trip. I let Agent Field in.

“Good morning, Carrol,” he said. “Just touching base with you.”

“It’s a good thing you did, Agent,” I told him, and filled him in on Charlie’s encounter on the previous day. The coffee I served him, my second pot of the morning, was not of the better sort.

“Still no mention of when it will be.” Field was unhappy about that.

I’d been thinking about it. “I doubt he will give them much advance notice.”

“No. He might even wait until the day itself. I don’t think we need to talk to Charlie about this. Is she doing okay?”

“Yeah. Kids that age bounce back well.” I had no idea if that was true but it sounded good.

He didn’t hang for long. A quarter after Nine. I did still have time to run out and shop. Presents for both Michelle and Charlie were in my shopping bags and ready to wrap when I returned, just a tad late for opening up. Not that there was anyone waiting to get in on this gloomy morn.

What did I buy? You’ll have to wait until they are unwrapped on Christmas morning to find out.

Chapter 67

Charlie's hair was bright red when she dropped by. Maybe she couldn't find any green dye on short notice.

"Still no tree, Shaper? Are you really going to wait for Christmas Eve?"

I hadn't even bought one yet. "I think so. Or a couple days before at the earliest." I was willing to be flexible.

"What will John think of that color?" I asked. Not to mention his rather conservative family, if they got a look at it.

A serious face. "I told him I wasn't going to see him again. Not until my problems were over."

"Problems are never over, kid. Not really."

"Well, that's a gloomy attitude, Shaper!" But she smiled. "Oh, I know what you mean. There is always something else that comes along."

"Yeah. Don't end up waiting too long for the right time." She would recognize there was a reference to myself buried in that. "Staying long?"

"No, it looks like even rainy Tuesdays are busy at this time of year. Did you talk to one of — them?" She nodded her head toward the house beyond my south wall.

"All taken care of."

She seemed satisfied but lingered at the door. "I kind of hope to see John some more. But he still isn't my type." With that, she was out and headed home.

And darned if John-boy himself didn't pop in less than an hour later. This must be one of his days off. "You just missed her," I told him.

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"I do miss her," he admitted. "That's strange, isn't it, Ted?"

Smitten. Poor kid. "I think this current, uh, situation will resolve itself soon. You'll get another chance."

John idly wandered around the perimeter of the room, gazing up at the boards I had displayed. "Who were those men?" he asked.

"Best you don't know. But the police do. They're keeping an eye on Charlie." I hoped that reassured him.

"I didn't see any police. That pair looked like they had just stepped off of South Beach."

John wasn't a hick. He could put things together.

"Yeah. I suspect that they did." I would not commit to more than that. "How is school?"

"Okay, but over for the semester. Finals were this past week." I should have been aware of that. But lots had been going on to distract me. "Instead of studying, I can moon around here."

"Feel free. Have you been studying anything in particular? I reckon you don't plan to pour coffee the rest of your life."

"I've taken some business classes but I don't know if that's the way I'm going. Hey, aren't you the guy who told me that making good coffee was an accomplishment or something?"

I had to chuckle. "Guilty. But I am also a guy who likes to see tangible results when he works." My hand swept toward the boards lining my walls. "I couldn't be in a business where it was all abstract."

"It must be cool to make surfboards," he mused.

"Still thinking you would change places with me?" I remembered that.

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“I did say that, didn’t I? I’m not a craftsman, Ted, but I wouldn’t mind having a shop like this.”

“I might be ready to sell in, oh, fifteen years.”

“I would only buy if you promised to keep making the boards.” He looked up at them again. “I could use a new board. I’ll have to put some money aside.”

I wasn’t going to offer him installment payments. I saved that for the kids. Let the credit card companies take care of the adults. John was definitely an adult, legally and emotionally.

Charlie, I think, only managed the legal part of it. “Any particular board in mind?” I asked him. Didn’t he have one I had built? It must be a couple years old.

“Oh, it will have to be custom. And,” he added, “it would have to have some special artwork on it.”

Of course it would.

Chapter 68

At last it happened, that evening.

“He only said to make sure that no one was in Room Eleven and not to rent it again until he said I could.”

Room Eleven. That was at the north end of the wing that paralleled the highway. Right next to the laundry room. I could see why he would choose it. There was a covered arcade where the two sections of the motel joined — that would help shield them from being watched — and a walkway that opened to the beach between the laundry room and the units.

I hadn’t been there. An hour later I might have, although Charlie and Michelle were terribly busy in the buildup to the Christmas weekend. But Michelle had phoned me as soon as Ray Manuel had slipped away.

I was aware that the federal agents had given Michelle a number to call but she had chosen to contact me, so I walked to that hidden-away old house next door and banged on their door. I hadn’t met the diminutive woman who answered it but I think she knew who I was.

“Come in. I’ll get Agent Johns.” Bob came in less than a minute and we settled into a pair of musty-smelling armchairs. I delivered everything Michelle had told me to him.

“Then it could be anytime in the next few days.” He frowned. “Even tomorrow night. We need to get moving on this.” He rose. Interview over, I assumed, so I stood too. “Thank you, Ted. You’d better head home. And you might want to stay out of the way for a while.”

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Not likely. There were two people over at that motel whom I cared for just a little too much.

I had to go over the next morning — only to say hello, I told myself, but of course I was worried about them. I was still there when Bob Johns rolled up in a sedan in front of the office. It looked to be a rental car. The small woman I had met at their house was with him. Perhaps I should say short woman, as she seemed to be pretty solidly muscled under that business suit.

“I want you to meet Agent Albritton. She is going to be my wife for the duration. We’ll need you to let us use a room for a night or two. Two beds, please.” He glanced toward his companion.

She remained impassive. I didn’t envy her having to share a room with Agent Johns.

“Don’t put us too close to Unit Eleven. Oh, and the government will reimburse you for the room. Eventually.” I wondered later what name they registered under. Never did find out.

I went home to sit and worry.

It did go down that night. I missed it all, of course, but the sound of gun shots roused me from bed, and blue lights were flashing soon after. I went out and stood on the sidewalk across the road, in front of *Kay’s Korner*. Kay and Rick joined me. No doubt Richie and Jan were watching from their respective bedroom windows. It wouldn’t be a good idea to go over and get in the way, no matter how much I wanted to see if Michelle and Charlie were all right.

“Was this something you expected?” asked Kay. I nodded. I didn’t feel like talking.

Someone coming over. It was Chief Cotton. He stood next to our

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little group for a moment and looked back the way he had come. "There wasn't much for me and my men to do over there," he said. "It was all a federal operation." He turned to me. "Your friends are okay. Some of the motel guests are pretty shaken though."

I could imagine. Fortunately, there wouldn't have been that many on this Wednesday night. "Can I go over?" I asked.

"I think so. Stay with me and no one will object." I followed him across. "They had men on the beach ready to sweep in, once delivery was made. Had to be in Manuel's possession first. I don't know if the Coast Guard managed to get their boat. I mean the bigger one that stayed off shore."

There was Michelle. I kind of hoped she would rush into my arms, all dramatic, but she chose to come over slowly and just sort of fell into me, head on my shoulder. "Are you okay?" I whispered. "And Charlie?"

"We're good. But I think those darned feds killed my ice machine."

"I heard shots."

"One of Ray's men took a bullet. Charlie really, really hoped they had shot Ray. But no such luck." I looked around for Charlie, for a moment forgetting that she no longer had that white hair. Oh, there she was, chatting rather casually with Agent Albritton. It strayed through my mind that Jan should meet Albritton if she still was thinking about going into law enforcement.

"You could come over to my place if you want to get away from this," I whispered to Michelle.

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“Thanks, Ted, but no. I need to stay and soothe my poor guests. But — but it would be nice if you stayed.”

Why not? “If our federal friends don’t mind.” It was already past midnight. Kind of cold standing out here in the parking lot.

“They don’t have a say in it,” she told me. “This is *my* motel.”

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“We’ll move out in a day or two,” said Agent Field. “No more to do here. It was good knowing you, Carrol.” He offered his hand. “But it will also be good to be home for Christmas.”

“Good to know you too, Agent.” We shook. “Is Johns still around?”

“Gone and not likely to be back.” I wasn’t exactly surprised that he hadn’t bothered to say goodbye. “Please say goodbye to young Miss Bell for me if I don’t get the chance. She’s a great kid. Probably would make a terrible agent, but a great kid.

“Charlie, on the other hand — Albritton was rather taken with her. Says we should give her a badge and a gun right now and turn her loose!” The thought obviously tickled him. “She did do well through all of this.”

Cop Charlie? I wasn’t sure I liked that idea.

“There is some small chance that she or Mrs. Jackson will be called on to testify. I pretty much doubt it.” Then, in what seemed an afterthought, “Mrs. Jackson — she still using that name?”

“Uh-huh. Too much trouble to change it.”

“Maybe you should give her a reason to change her name, Ted.” I think that was the one and only occasion he called me that. “I’ll be on my way. Have a great holiday.” It was the last time I ever saw him force his stocky form through the hedge.

It was Thursday afternoon and I was dead tired. Like Charlie, it would take a crash-and-burn situation for me to take a nap. This might be such a situation. Why, I was almost ready to call up Michelle and tell her I wouldn’t be able to come over this evening. Almost but not quite.

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It was not going to be the normal sort of evening dinner plus that was becoming routine for us. We were celebrating an end to all our turmoil. Mostly Michelle and Charlie's turmoil. I'd been pulled along in their wake, sort of.

Ray Manuel put behind bars, just days before Christmas. I think that was the best Christmas present they could have received. Man, Christmas — school let out for the holidays sometime in the middle of this week, didn't it? Today, maybe?

Get up and do something. That will wake you up, Ted. As soon as — who is it today? Oh, Lisa. A soon as Lisa comes in and I can get out of the shop. It had been pretty busy today but she could handle it solo for an hour or so. She's come along great. I know, I'll go and get a tree. And decorate it today. No more nagging from Charlie.

I did just that. A little one to put on a table at the front window, me and Lisa to decorate it. It did make the shop look nice, didn't it? And even nicer from outside. I don't think I'd felt this much Christmas spirit in years and years.

And maybe more years than that.

I didn't pick up just a tree. They had those bottles of fake champagne there that show up around the holidays. I chose the sparkling grape juice over the sparkling cider and had it chilling in my fridge before heading out.

"That stuff is pretty awful," commented Charlie, on seeing the bottle I had brought.

"That it might be," I told her, "but you have to drink at least one toast. A toast to the future."

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“The future is looking better now, isn’t it, Shaper?”

“At least I can see it now. I wasn’t sure it was there before. Have you let John know he is no longer banned?” That didn’t last very long. If she hadn’t told him, he might not have even known it happened.

She didn’t quite frown but she got pretty pensive looking. “Not yet. I have a lot in my head still, you know?” Sure. Not the least of it, her father’s death.

“We all do, Charlie,” said her mother, emerging from the bedroom. She came over and gave me a peck. I hoped I wasn’t in the same boat as John-boy. “Better get that back into the cold,” she told me, eyeing the bottle.

It was pretty low-key for a celebration. A band of weary warriors. I fear even our toasts weren’t very enthusiastic.

“To the future,” I said, raising my glass. “May it bring long lives and big waves.” A favorite toast of mine, from way back. Pat and I used to say that.

“And to love,” said Michelle. I meant to add that. Really!

“And puppies,” added Charlie.

We clinked and drank. Charlie was right. It was awful. But we downed it all anyway.

I was tired, wasn’t I? I found myself sitting and just sort of staring at Michelle as she cleared the table. I thought she was nice to stare at. Much nicer than the sofa or the bookcase.

“Shaper is going to fall asleep,” Charlie said to her mom. “You’d better get what you need out him fast.”

“Charlie! Behave yourself.” But she did snicker. “Come on, you,”

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she told me. "We can be tired together. Can you finish the dishes, Charlie?"

"Sure, Mom. But I think I'll call up John first."

Chapter 70

Friday morning. Into my shop came an angry woman. A frustrated woman. A woman who had been crying. She clutched a document in her hand.

“This came by a special messenger this morning.” Michelle slapped it down on the counter. “The motel owners have moved to cancel the lease. They’re claiming that I have broken my contract by letting undesirable persons loiter there. Criminal elements. There’s all sorts of legalese — but it all comes down to us getting out at the end of the month.

“I can’t fight this, Ted. I don’t have the money. I don’t have the time.”

I knew she was right. They had the upper hand here.

“You didn’t fail, Michelle. This is not on you.”

“It feels an awful lot like failure, Ted.”

I’m sure it did. And damn, just when she thought she’d had a little victory.

“I know attorneys if you want to try.” How could I comfort her? What could I say?

She shook her head. I wasn’t helping. “They want me out. They’ll find a way.” Michelle looked at me. “How will I tell Charlie?”

Nothing but questions for both of us. The answers had all flown away and hidden themselves.

The phone rang. Let the machine get it. “Pick that up, Ted,” said Michelle. “I don’t want to listen to it ring.”

Okay. “*Cully Beach Surf Shop*. Ted speaking.”

“Hey, Ted. It’s Pat.”

“Oh, Pat. Hi. Um, I was just in the middle —” I looked up. She

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was gone. “Never mind about that. What’s on your mind? If you’ve grown one lately.” It was obligatory to insult each other now and again.

“I don’t need a mind of my own. I have a wife. Who says it might be nice to come over after Christmas and spend a few leisurely days.”

“Well, I’ll be here.”

“Aren’t you always? Just wanted to check though before calling up the motel.”

“About that —” And I filled him in about what just went down. “I assume she will close down pretty much immediately. But you can check. And, hey, as always my spare room is available.”

“That’s pretty damned bad, Ted. What is she going to do? Does she have somewhere to go?”

“I don’t know, man. I don’t know.” I wasn’t going to pour out my woes to Pat. It had always gone the other way with us. But I’m sure he could tell I was hurting.

“Tell her she has friends. That includes Betty and me.” There was a moment of silence but before I could speak, he continued. “I’ll tell her myself, in fact. I’m going to call right now. So — goodbye.” And he hung up.

I think I mostly brooded the next hour or so, feeling powerless. Feeling stupid that I didn’t know what to do.

When Jan came in to work — filling in on this day — her mother was with her. Their faces made it obvious that they had heard.

All three of us went back to the kitchen and I made a pot of tea.

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As soon as I started, I wished I hadn't — all I could think of was the last time I made tea for someone. I poured each of us a cup and sat down. The door to the shop stood open so I could keep an eye on things up there.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" asked Jan. I suspect that she had already asked this more than once. She had me to hear it now.

"There might be but I doubt she would let us," Kay said. "She told me that she is calling up everyone with reservations and telling them the motel has closed. She just wants to get out and forget."

Do I remind her of her failure here? Does she want to forget me too?

"Charlie is really broken up," said Jan.

"Michelle is too, I think. She's not willing to show it."

"She has always needed to be the one to show strength in her family," I said, as much to myself as to them.

Kay nodded. "I think you are absolutely right there, Ted." She reached over and patted me on the leg. "Both of you build your walls high."

I wouldn't deny it on my part.

A couple of customers came in and Jan went up to wait on them. "The only thing that could hold them here now is you, Ted," whispered Kay. "I don't know how. Maybe you can figure it out."

"I don't know how either, Kay. It's like everything was an illusion. A dream."

"Now, Ted Carol, an illusion is nothing but reality seen from the wrong angle." That was a statement with which I could pretty much agree. "So take a step to your right and take another look. I'd

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better run along.” She headed back across the lawns to her own house.

Sometime after her mom — and the customers — left, Jan came back. “There’s still some hot tea,” I told her. “Pour you another cup?”

“Sure, Shaper. Thanks.”

She sat and sipped for a time before speaking. “Haven’t they had enough?” she asked. “You said God intervenes through us, Shaper. So how do we do it?”

Lots of hard questions today. Sometimes I had ready answers.

I wondered if I ever would again.

“Maybe only God knows,” I told her, “because I sure don’t.”

Chapter 71

I could see Charlie coming down the sidewalk, her swim fins and body-board under her arm. She paused for a few seconds outside the shop and gazed at the tree in my window.

"I like your tree," she said as she came in, and held out the board and fins. "I'm returning these. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is, kid." She handed them over.

Then she couldn't hold it together any longer. "Oh, Shaper, I don't want to go. Why do we have to go?" She sobbed, her head buried in my chest. If she had looked up, she might have seen a tear in my own eye.

"Why does Mom have to be so set on things? So we aren't going to own a motel here. Does that make Cully Beach so bad?" She was settling down and loosened her grip on me. Some.

"We're already packing. Mom wants to leave tomorrow." Christmas Eve? "She doesn't even know where we are going to go. We have relatives in Georgia somewhere, she says. Dad's relatives. I don't know if they would want to see us."

Just a tad brighter. "Mr. Edwards said we could crash at his place. There might be jobs in Ruby. If there aren't, we could move on later." She sighed "I hope Mom does that." Thank you, Pat. Thank you.

"I do wish you could both stay right here."

She stepped back and looked into my eyes. "Then you have to say something to her, Shaper."

I didn't answer her. What was wrong with me?

She looked at me for a while, just looked at me. Disappointment.

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Both of us. "John is going to come over later so we can say goodbye. And just when I started to think maybe he was my type after all."

God, I hurt. We all hurt. We wanted to be together, Michelle and I, didn't we? Why were we letting our pride, our independence, push us away from each other?

"Bye, Shaper," said Charlie, giving me another hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Merry Christmas."

I watched her walk into a Saturday morning. Would I go over to the *Easy Breezes* and say goodbye again, goodbye to her, goodbye to her mother? Or would I sit here and watch them drive away?

Who was I to tell Michelle what to do or try to take charge of her life?

I should mind my own business, the way I always had.

My mind went to those Christmas packages I had wrapped, sitting unopened in my spare bedroom. My spare bedroom — what use was it? It had sat unoccupied for ten years. As had so much else.

So much else.

I should go surfing and forget everything. That had always worked. Go back to my first love, my true love, the one that would never leave me. Close the shop for the holidays. Get in the truck and disappear until the Jacksons were no longer here and only their ghosts would come and go.

Maybe I would. Maybe I wouldn't. But the thought had been planted and I went around to the rear to look at my surfboards, and all the paraphernalia of a surf trip. There were so many little things one needed to remember and gather, wax and ankle leashes and duct tape for quick repairs Towels and trunks. Sun screen. Maybe it

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would occupy my mind. It was a long time since I went on surfari. Ha, it was a long time since anyone but the Beach Boys used that word.

I looked at my boards, my 'quiver.' And there was Michelle looking back at me, painted with care and love on a surfboard.

I looked at it and remembered.

For a moment, I felt like destroying that board, smashing it down onto the driveway pavement, stamping on it until I could no longer make out her picture.

Like getting a tattoo, Bill Cotton had said. I wanted it to be that permanent.

But people don't last. One goes and another comes. Isn't that what I had told myself?

I knew I was an idiot but never realized how much of one.

Maybe all I needed to do was ask. To not fear telling someone that I needed them. To no longer be the guy who never owed anyone anything.

Ask. Ask a stupid question. Ask and you shall receive. Ask anything.

Ask her to marry me. That would send her flying, thinking it not real, thinking it only pity. Thinking of how Bradley Jackson had once stepped up for her and then failed. Of this I was quite certain. She didn't need a knight.

But, in truth, I was willing to marry Michelle. No, I *wanted* to marry Michelle. I probably knew that all along.

Let me take that step to the right. I didn't have to use the M-word, did I? Not right now.

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No, not right now. But if one dream had disappeared it was time to show her a different one.

Must be going on afternoon. Was someone coming in after school? No, dope, it's Saturday and school is out for the holidays, anyway. I didn't care. I fixed a leisurely lunch. I needed time to think a little. To plan. I had stopped planning, stopped hoping, for a while there, seeing no use. Times like those were when I got lost.

Into the spare bedroom I went and got the wrapped presents. These need to be somewhere else. A lot of this stuff might need to be somewhere else soon.

The 'just stepped out' sign turned outward, the door locked. Out the back I stepped and up the sidewalk toward the corner. Don't hurry, Ted. There is time to do this.

They were loading their van. John was helping but seemed less than enthusiastic about it.

Michelle came over and hugged me. It was a sad hug, a resigned hug. A goodbye hug. No, Michelle, I will have none of that.

I addressed them, mother and daughter. "If you want your gifts they're under the tree in my shop, ready to be opened on Christmas morning."

"Oh, Ted, you know —" I cut her off. Yeah, me.

"You have to stay, Michelle. That's all there is to it."

"Yes, Mom. How else can we get our presents?" Not exactly what I meant, but thanks for adding it, Charlie.

"How else can I be happy?" I asked. "How else can we be happy?"

"But how can I stay? What would I do?"

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"There might be an opening at the surf shop. Those kids are so darn unreliable. Tuesday afternoon if you'd like." I could fire Richie.

"Wow, three hours a week?"

"Of course, there is room and board attached. And I don't mean a surf board though I would throw one in if you asked. I can be reasonable."

"Can Charlie have a puppy?"

"She can have even have the boy that goes with it if she wants." John wouldn't object.

"Then we have a bargain. The hell with this motel. It was trying to ruin my life even after I was done with it!" She came into my arms. "All I want to do is work in the *Cully Beach Surf Shop* from now on."

"I bet you'll be my best employee," I said.

"Damned right I will! But you have to build me an indoor shower. That's a deal-breaker."

"Sure. Just give me ten years."

"I'll give you forever, Shaper."

Afterword

SHAPER is the fourteenth book and seventh novel by Stephen Brooke but his first about surfers. This might seem odd, since the author is himself a surfer and has shaped a few boards in his time. He has also turned out illustrated children's books, nonfiction, and volumes of poetry, all available from Arachis Press, a small publisher dedicated to presenting meaningful literature for readers of all ages. Visit arachispress.com for our catalog.

Cully Beach is quite mythical. This does not mean it has no resemblance to certain towns on Florida's Atlantic coast. All we are willing to say about it is that Cully Beach would lie somewhere between Daytona Beach and Jacksonville.

The text of this book was set in the Dihjauti typeface.