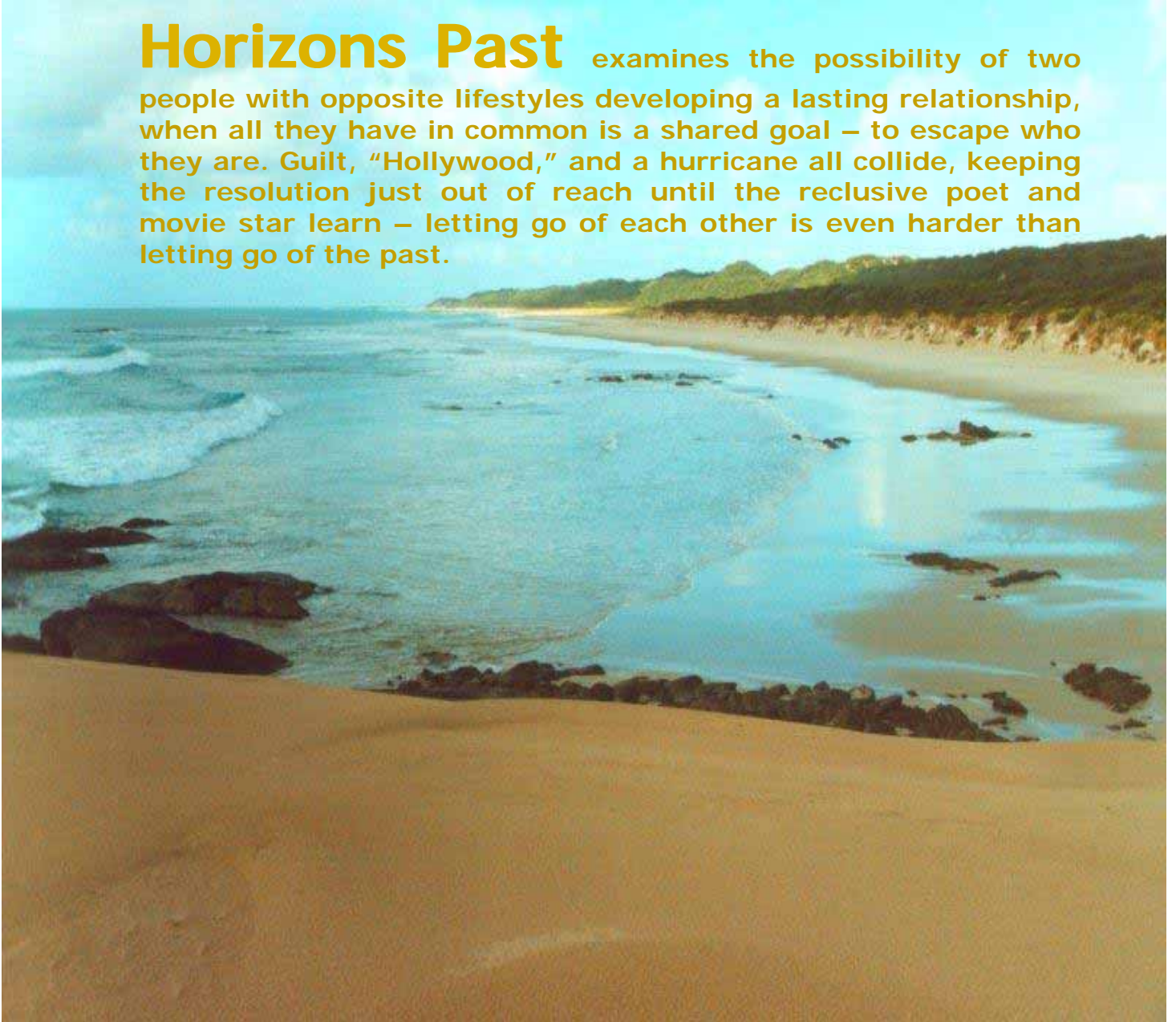


Horizons Past
A Novel

by Bill Stephens



Horizons Past examines the possibility of two people with opposite lifestyles developing a lasting relationship, when all they have in common is a shared goal – to escape who they are. Guilt, “Hollywood,” and a hurricane all collide, keeping the resolution just out of reach until the reclusive poet and movie star learn – letting go of each other is even harder than letting go of the past.



Horizons Past – Bill Stephens

87,000 words

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A Novel

By

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Chapter 1

Approaching what was left of Fish Pass Road, State Park Ranger Jeffrey Randall slowed his Bronco and stopped before turning. Lottie looked at him. “It’s something we really have to do, right?” Jeffrey nodded agreement, but said nothing.

He had driven the twelve miles of Texas Park Road 361 between Mustang Island State Park and Port Aransas several times daily in the seven weeks since the hurricane. His days were now totally dedicated to rebuilding the park’s infrastructure, but each day after his shift he drove into town to help friends with their efforts to rebuild and to regain their normal lives.

There were temporary repairs to the road, but potholes and washed out sections of pavement remained, and still caused him to bounce and weave through a series of small detours. Progress was slow on this trip out from Port Aransas, but neither he nor Lottie were anxious to reach their destination.

Since the hurricane, Jeffrey had become numbed to the destruction: the brown landscape killed by salt water standing for weeks; the dunes, flattened and spread over the island like Silly Putty. The watermark still prominent above the second floor of the high rise beach condos; their windows and doors now open holes staring blankly out at the contents flushed out through them by the storm surge and strewn about their once well kept grounds. The beach houses that had vanished still got to him, though. Until now he hadn’t allowed himself to look at one particular

cluster of three broken, leaning pilings standing like giant hat pins stuck in a sandy pin cushion, a monument to the missing home that was their destination today.

Jeffrey downshifted and swung onto the ruts that were now the road. The Bronco bumped and lurched along the road until it finally cleared what was left of the dunes and hit the beach. He turned north and drove along the hardpan left by today's ebbing tide. The beach was surprisingly clean, and they both looked out on the Gulf of Mexico, rocking under a calm breeze. Jeffrey drew in a deep breath of salt air and held it before exhaling. "Out there I could almost forget all the misery behind us."

Lottie nodded acknowledgment, but not agreement. "I wonder if we'll ever forget." She picked up a red leather book from the seat between them and silently mouthed the title, *Horizons Passed*, by Christopher Maben. She reached down to adjust the ice bucket at her feet that held a bunch of mixed flowers and a champagne bottle. "I'll try not to get emotional, but I can't promise . . ."

Jeffrey smiled at her through eyes already glistening but said nothing. He stopped abreast of the three pilings, and they both sat in the Bronco for a while before Jeffrey said, "It's time we did this." He stepped from the truck, walked to Lottie's door, and offered his hand to help her out. She still clutched the book, and Jeffrey lifted the ice bucket from the floorboard, then reached back for two plastic cups that rolled onto the floor beside it. They walked toward the pilings and stood silently for an extended time, finally moving to the water's edge. Lottie handed him the book, removed her sandals, and took the flowers. She waded into the surf to her knees and gently placed the flowers in the water and stood as they drifted seaward on the tide.

Jeffrey handed her the book when she returned to shore. With the late afternoon sun behind them they gazed out to where an almost cloudless sky met the water. When she opened

the book Lottie choked with emotion, but composed herself and read:

*Horizons past were filled with dread
That barrier bisecting earth and sky
That stifled all escape.
Then you appeared and filled the void
With touch, and smile, and sacred scent,
And with your eyes you cast a light
And woke my soul
To dream
To love
To Soar
Beyond horizons passed*

Jeffrey loosed the cork on the champagne. The sound it made exploding from the bottle was startling in the quiet; abrupt and urgent as it flew away toward the bisecting barrier. He handed one of the two cups to Lottie and filled each with champagne. They touched their cups, turned to face the horizon, and Jeffrey said, “To Chris.”

Lottie added, as a single tear made its way down her cheek, “To the man we both loved.”

Chapter 2

Christopher Maven flailed off the couch just before dawn and lay on the floor with fear creeping through his pores as sweat. He sagged as the terror slowly ebbed, and he saw beside him the empty wine bottle that put him to sleep on the couch the night before and launched his re-visitation of the dream. He sat on the edge of the couch, gathering himself, and finally staggered to his desk. He picked up a desk calendar, tore off the “September 30, 1999” page, crumpled it, and dropped it into the wastebasket.

He had struggled beyond memory with his demons, endlessly repressing them, driving them deeper into those subconscious pools where they could repose with no compulsion to reform. But vulnerability opened like an old wound when sleep dissolved his defenses. The scene, always the same, always an abstract scroll slowly unwinding through his psyche, projecting images of that part of his life he had tried for a lifetime to escape.

The rest of the predawn he sat at the desk, head in hands. Now, he stood looking up at the bedroom loft, and the demons of the night returned again. He moved to the desk, picked up a notebook, stuffing it into a beach bag along with a bottle of water. He wrapped a towel around his nakedness and headed out the door to the deck.

He stood for a moment on the deck of his beach house wearing only the modesty towel.

At age sixty he felt good about his dark tan and youthful muscle tone that made others think him younger, even with his mane of silver hair. The horizon to the east was tousled and ragged with clouds slathered in first light and trimmed in orange hues. “Red sky in morning, sailors take warning,” he mumbled, staring for some time, first to the left and then to the right. The Texas beach stretched seamless and uninhabited in both directions.

Dunes shouldered the beach comfortably while dead calm left the surf clear to the sand. Fall’s first norther had swept the beach free of seaweed and clutter the day before, but weakened by the effort, stalled and now retreated from the onslaught of the building cumulus. The cool air was still and clear enough to see into tomorrow.

This makes it worthwhile, he thought. He drew in a deep breath of air filled with the watermelon smell of sea trout schooling in the surf.

With hot summer days and tourists gone, the natural order of things returned as if from migration. Silence, except for an occasional seagull and the far distant hum of tires on the highway, was magnified in the fall air.

“A wake-up call for my soul,” he said aloud.

Moving down the dune-bridge, he stepped onto the beach and walked toward the water, pausing at a raised shoal of sand above the beach, which, the day before, was packed by the surf and now stood dry above the nighttime high tide. He nodded, smiled, and wrote for less than a minute in a small notebook. Closing it, he looked again at the building clouds, shrugged, and retreated into the house.

Still bothered by the previous night, he felt he needed a distraction from the restlessness that stirred in him like an invisible insect buzzing around his head. He looked back at the water and thought, fishing! I need purification by fishing! He gathered his beach bag, fishing rods,

sand-spike rod holders, bait bucket, cast net, umbrella, and chair; he headed back over the dune bridge. His passion for fishing often went under appreciated, like anything too familiar, but now the thought of battling “the big one” loosed a bedspring of excitement in his stomach.

* * *

Trish Lowe opened her Omni Hotel penthouse curtains casting her eyes skyward at the roiling overcast and said, “Not a chance!” The sky, mottled and turbulent with dark clouds, made today’s outdoor scenes impossible. The four weeks of filming since arriving in Corpus Christi, Texas, were blessed with great weather, and yesterday’s cloudless sky provided a productive backdrop for movie making, but forget it today. There would be no way to match the sky in the continuing scene.

At the room desk she wrote a note asking the director to shoot around her today. After dressing in her jogging clothes, she grabbed her beach tote bag, her favorite book of poetry, and her room key. The cell phone on the nightstand caught her attention, but shaking her head she said, “Not today.”

She left her suite and stopped by the concierge desk. “Ramon, give this note to my driver when he arrives, please.” She handed him a tip and hurried through the lobby to the hotel parking lot.

The candy-apple red Sebring convertible flashed across the John F. Kennedy Causeway Bridge, top down, and the cool salt air breathed new life into her jaded soul. Her ponytail fluttered behind her baseball cap and her large sunglasses masked her face completing her disguise. She slowed at the Padre Island red light, and turned left on Texas Park Road 361 toward Port Aransas.

Mustang Island State Park had been her sanctuary since shortly after her arrival on location in Corpus Christi to begin shooting her latest movie, but today she needed complete solitude. She drove past the entrance and did not turn toward the beach until Fish Pass Road. The convertible slowed, laboring through the loose beach sand at the pavement's end. It shuddered, bucked twice, and stuck. She slammed the accelerator to the floor, and the tires spun, spraying sand skyward, burying the back tires to the axle.

“Shit!” she shouted to a vacant beach. “I wanted to jog, but not back to town.” As she fumbled in her beach bag, she remembered leaving her cell phone at the hotel to prevent unwanted disturbances “Damn.” Her voice echoed again.

She stood in the car seat looking for help closer than the state park. Heat waves now shimmered from the sand, and the clouds drifted over like lumps of meringue, offering shade but promising showers. In the far distance she could see a beach umbrella and chair and behind that, a house above the dunes.

“Can do.” She raised the convertible top, stepped from the car, and locked it. She checked her jogging gear one more time and set off at a lively cadence toward her deliverance.

Christopher Maven jolted from his sleep under the umbrella when something hit the sand behind him, and he jumped again when a female voice panted, “Wow! I think I’m gonna die. I can’t jog another step. How far is it from Fish Pass Road to here?”

He didn’t answer.

“Hello? Look, I’m stuck in the sand down at Fish Pass. It looked like about a mile up here, but it took forever.” She still spoke to the back of his beach chair.

“Distances are a little deceiving when the air is this clear.” The answer came from the

chair.

“Ten more steps, and you would be giving me mouth-to-mouth right now.”

“I think I’m sorry I missed that part.”

Her head snapped up from her knees, and she considered the silver hair sticking above the canvas beach-lounging chair before answering, “Actually, I hope you’ll help me pull my car out, or at least let me use your phone.”

“Can’t help you.” There was agitation in the voice.

“Why not? I’m willing to pay.”

“No car.”

“You don’t have a car? How do you get around?”

“Not that it’s your concern, but I have a bicycle for emergencies.”

“A bicycle? Well, could you phone for help?”

“No phone.”

“No phone? Is there any way you can help me? Like I said, I’m willing to pay.” She was beginning to get a little upset herself.

“Afraid I can’t help you. Sorry.” The statement sounded final.

“But . . . but why? I mean I . . . I need help. Can’t you understand that?” She was moving on the offensive.

“No clothes,” he replied.

“No clothes?” she sputtered. “For God’s sake, man, you don’t have to dress for the occasion!”

“No clothes *now*.” he said with emphasis.

“You . . . you’re naked?” she asked.

“You’ve got it. I wasn’t expecting company.” He added, “I never expect company.”

“Let’s see if I’m right. I did a forced march just to find a nude man on a public beach with no telephone and no car?”

“Like I said. I didn’t invite you.” She could see his arm make an emphatic gesture.

She sat quietly in the sand for a time wondering what to do and thinking about her bad luck to run into this complete asshole.

“You still there?” His voice was a little more conciliatory.

“Yes.”

After a slight pause he said, “Well, if you’ll avert your eyes. I’ll get up and do the best I can with this towel here. I guess I’ll have to help just to get you to leave.”

She thought about the millions of men dying to show her theirs if she showed them hers, but here was this grumpy old bastard telling her not to peek. “OK, I promise I won’t peek.” She broke into laughter in spite of herself.

Christopher stood, turned to get the towel, and saw a stunning body sitting on the sand swathed in robin’s egg blue Spandex, and black hair in a ponytail pulled through the back of a ball cap but, as promised, no eyes. He quickly did a Turkish bath towel-wrap. “Sorry, about your problem. I don’t see many people around here, and any I do always want something.” He started to walk away, then turned. “Why don’t you sit under the umbrella while I go inside and get dressed?”

As she looked up, the sun produced a halo effect silhouetting his face and bushy silver hair. Her experienced eye gave high marks to his physique, but judging by his face and hair, he looked to be much older than she. I wonder what’s under that towel, she thought. Then she waited for the inevitable exclamation, “You’re Trish Lowe!”

When it didn't come, she asked, "You catching a late vacation or just a cold?"

"No, I live here," he said with no apology.

She swung back to look at the beach house and wide-eyed, blurted out, "What on earth do you do out here?"

"You're sitting on it." He pointed to the sand.

"No, I'm sitting on what I do." She looked for a response to her joke, but there was none.

He just pointed at the sand.

For the first time since she collapsed, she looked down and saw writing, lines like poetry scratched into the sand:

The wind is changing.

Will I hold fast?

Or drift past the horizon

Like dunes and clouds?

She was sitting on the "S" in "clouds." "I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't looking when I flopped."

"No problem. It's just part of the test." Christopher adjusted his towel for security.

"The test?"

"Sometimes a verse or poem needs validation, so I pick a place and write it in the sand. If it makes it through the night, I know it deserves a shot at immortality." He traced a line in the sand with his toe.

"Why wouldn't it make it through the night?"

“Tide, wind, rain, even tire tracks . . . and, of course, people.”

“People like me?”

He thought for a few seconds before replying, “No . . . I don’t think people like you.” He shook his head in disagreement.

“This one made the cut?” she pointed at the sand.

“Yup!” He was beginning to enjoy the conversation.

“What if it hadn’t?”

“I would forget it.” He thought for a second and added, “or if I really liked it, I might try again.”

“That sounds like cheating!” .

“It might not be smart trusting everything to the unknown.” He looked away and dug his toe into the word “horizon” as he replied. “Look, I’ll go in and put something on. I’ll be right back.”

Trish turned and regarded the water for the first time. The surf, normally opaque from the sand, today lay blue to the edge. Tiny swells undulated and rippled to the beach. She breathed in the pungent smell of salt air and exhaled gradually. The lines on three fishing poles spiked in the sand swaged into the surf. A flock of gulls circled over a spot directly out from them. Several swooped, hitting the water before rising again with a small fish for a paycheck.

A gossamer mantle floated through her soul seining away all the debris. This was it! Sanctuary. Paradise with a naked sand-poet thrown in for good measure, she thought. Anonymity. Freedom from the constant grind of stardom.

The longest fishing rod began to quiver, then bow, and flex. “Why is that fishing pole jumping around?” she asked.

Christopher wheeled around and with the first glimpse of the rod, bolted toward the water holding his towel and shouting, “We have a fish! Come on!”

Trish took up the chase as if her director had just shouted, “Action!”

When he yanked up the rod, rearing back on it to set the hook, the towel that had valiantly held fast relaxed and drifted to the sand at his feet. “Whoops!” he shouted, but there was little he could do to repair the situation with the fish trying to steal his fishing tackle.

She stopped a few feet behind him and chortled, “Why don’t you slip into something more comfortable?”

“Here!” He handed the rod behind him without turning around. “Grab this!”

“What? I’ve never caught a fish.”

“Just grab it and start cranking.” He shook the rod at her.

When she took the rod, the force of the fish caught her off balance and pulled her forward, and she let out a combination squeal and whoop straight from a horror movie. She almost lost her grip on the rod but recovered, found the reel, and began furiously cranking.

Christopher, with his towel problems repaired, shouted, “Easy! Easy! Rod tip up! Hold your rod tip up! Now crank! Don’t horse it around, you’ll lose the fish.”

“Easy? This thing’s killing me here! Take the rod before I lose it!” Her voice escalated an octave of excitement.

“Nope, it’s all yours. You’re doing fine,” he said. Just then the fish made a heroic run for freedom, and the reel drag screamed as it slipped.

“WHOOOAH! Steady, big fellow.” She held the rod without cranking to get a breath.

“Keep cranking. If you’re resting, she’s resting. Rod tip up!”

“I think we both need a rest here.” Her voice still registered high-pitched excitement. As

she cranked, the fish began tiring, and after about five minutes it broke the surface twenty feet in front of her. She shrieked, “AHHHHH!” dropped the rod and retreated, stamping her feet in excitement. Chris grabbed the line and pulled the fish into the shallow surf.

“Look at him! He’s huge! Jesus, what a rush! What is it?” she asked as he grabbed the fish and held it up, still clutching the towel with the other hand.

“Red fish. A nice one.”

“A nice one? It’s a whale? How big is it?” She continued bouncing.

“At least ten pounds, I’d say.” Chris held the fish up to better examine it.

“What do we do with it?” She started laughing with glee.

“That’s up to you. We can eat it, or turn it loose,” he explained.

“Are they good to eat?” She bent over to look more closely.

“Wonderful. One of my favorites,” he said.

“Let’s eat it! No! Turn it loose! No! Oh, I don’t know what to do!”

“If you’ve never caught a fish before, it might be a nice gesture to give back your first fish. An offering of kindness and respect to all the other fish, so to speak. Besides, I caught another one earlier and it’s already cleaned and in the refrigerator.”

“Great! Turn it loose.” She stepped back in anticipation.

“No, you turn it loose.” He motioned with his head to come closer.

“I’ve never touched one of those things.” She backed away.

“OK, come here,” he said.

The “director” prevailed, and she moved into action, stepping beside him and squatting in the surf, \$150 sneakers, and all. “Show me what to do.”

He removed the hook, lowered the fish back into the water, being mindful of his towel,

and explained, “Put your hands under her and just cradle her gently.”

She obeyed without flinching and he removed his hands. “How do you know it’s a `her’?”

“The big ones usually are female. Feel right here.” He stooped and moved her hand back a little. “Feel that? She’s full of eggs, thousands of them.”

She didn’t reply, but thought, what a wonderful feeling. Not at all slimy. I am squatting here cradling life.

“What now?” she asked her mentor.

“Move her back and forth and get the water moving through her gills until she swims out of your hands.” He stepped back and admired the picture of this beautiful woman toiling over the fish to revive and release it. He saw the tail began undulating, and the fish swim slowly out of her hands and into deeper water.

“God, that was better than catching her.” Trish stood to get a last glimpse before the fish disappeared.

Just as the red fish swam away, the clouds that had formed up to deliver their promise peppered the surf with drops, and the clean scent of ozone-laced rain filled the air. Christopher surveyed the rain and declared, “That’s a real frog strangler. Better get inside. Lower the umbrella, and then take my beach bag inside. I’ll get the rest.”

They scurried over the beach as the rain and wind increased in intensity. He reeled in fishing lines, grabbed the bait bucket, bait net, sand-spike rod holders, and turned toward the house. He saw the wind towing Trish down the beach clutching the umbrella’s pole. The squall’s wind filled the umbrella, and she looked like a first time skydiver wrestling the harness of her chute.

Holding the fishing gear and his towel as best as he could, Chris ran past her, stopped in

front of the umbrella using his back as a bulwark, and shouted, “We need to turn it into the wind.” Together they rotated 180 degrees until the wind helped close the umbrella. “Turn the crank!”

The umbrella obliged and collapsed as Trish cranked, but the crown-point caught his towel and dragged it down to his knees. The wind, as if cheated by the umbrella, grabbed the towel and sailed it over her head and into the sand dunes.

There it is again, she thought surveying his darkly tanned backside. He was a decent looking older sand-poet with hands full of fishing gear and silver mane quaking in the wind and rain. Oh, what a day this is, she chortled, dropped the umbrella and beach bag, and collapsed to her knees laughing. She recovered enough to say, “Maybe we should be introduced since I’m seeing more of you these days.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t shake hands right now,” he replied. “But my name is Chris.”

“Well, Chris, my name is Trish.” She broke down laughing again. Recovering her composure, she added, “Seriously, Chris?”

“Yes?”

“Your place, or mine?” she said through peals of laughter.

Chris had grabbed a towel drying on the deck railing before she came over the dune bridge.

“Come on up. I’ll clean up and get dressed, and fix us some lunch. You can use the bath if you like.”

Trish had time to look around while she toweled her wet hair. The dune bridge and deck were actually on the second floor of the house. Piling supported the A-frame portion of the house above the dunes, and the space beneath its floor was enclosed like a garage or large

storage room. The main floor was one room sectioned into a well-equipped kitchen, a living room/study with a fireplace, and a bathroom. Upstairs must be the sleeping loft, she thought. It was open to the room below and seemed to have a beach view through a triangular window at the house's apex.

On closer inspection, she saw that the house was unpretentious and her host wanted for very little. A computer occupied part of the desk. A television with a VCR, a library of videos, and an impressive stereo system rounded out the entertainment package. Full bookcases covered the walls, and a large expensive looking painting of huge sequoia trees hung above the fireplace mantel. At the base of the trees was a nude reclining female bathed in sunlight. She remembered seeing a similar painting in California. The room was fairly well ordered, but not compulsive.

Trish moved to the videos, running her finger along the titles, and stopped with a jerk on the cover of a movie called *She*. Removing it, she walked to the desk. A copy of the poetry book, *Lost Above the Far Below* by Christopher Maven, lay near the computer — the same book she had in her beach tote. A sand-poet *would* have a few poetry books, she mused.

God, what a devilish day this is, Chris thought while drying after a quick shower, and it isn't over yet! The stuck car would require a hike back with boards and shovel, then digging, then pushing and probably more of the same. "I hate life transfusions," he growled to himself. Strangers always left him restless and confused and often loosed the demons that had hounded him into sanctuary. And what about that ridiculous towel, he grimaced into the mirror. Christ, that girl must think I'm a freakish pervert. But then Trish Lowe seemed a little different — not at all like the assholes he thought movie stars to be. Actually, she was not like most other people.

She sat at the small dining table near the kitchen, reading a book when he stepped from the bathroom still barefooted, but wearing an old pair of blue jean cutoffs and a white T-shirt. His hair returned to its original mane with no hair dryer, or hairbrush for that matter. She glanced up from the book and smiled. “Well! We finally meet, face to face.”

“I’m sorry about everything out there. You know.” He gestured toward the beach. “I’m not a very social person. And that towel . . . I mean, I’m not a pervert either.”

She smiled to ease his apparent discomfort. “I hope you don’t mind me borrowing your book. It’s my favorite. It’s helped me through some rough places in my life.” She held the book out to him.

“Is it helping you through today?” He asked, taking the book.

“Actually, this is one of the better days in recent memory.”

“Except for having to see a lot more of me than you cared to.”

“We are about even, I think.” She said holding up the video of *She*.

She was her first movie and Hollywood’s fifth remake of H. Rider Haggard’s novel. The title was the only similarity between the book and the movie. The critics dubbed it, “A monolithic piece of trash!” Hollywood tired of *She* being an ice princess, and had set the movie in the jungle somewhere “in a distant land.” It was a Tarzan knock-off tale of a white girl raised by a tribe of natives who held her as a deity dropped from heaven. She and the natives did fine until a group of explorers found her and kidnapped her, taking her back to civilization. A litany of tragedies saw her degenerate into an exploited topless dancer performing under the stage name, “*She*,” whose native talent and raw emotions abounded. She mesmerized her audiences. But all was not lost as *She* escaped, and through a series of action scenes that included diving from a cruise ship

on which she was an entertainer, She escapes back to the pristine life and sanctuary of the jungle.

Through all this drivel one thing captivated the critics and later Christopher Maveen. Trish Lowe, a new star, somehow built dramatic equity into hackneyed lines while wearing less than Tarzan. Her beauty was stifling, and as one critic said, “My God, that girl could dance!”

Chris stood motionless clearing his throat several times. He shuffled his feet and finally said in a muffled voice, “I guess you got me there.”

“This piece of fluff is a little out of place beside *Cannery Row* and *Anna Karenina*.” She pointed to the shelf of videos.

“Well, it had its moments,” he replied.

“Still, you’ve seen a lot more of me than I have of you.”

“Not really.” He looked at the poetry book in his hand.

Chapter 3

Leah Armour, Trish’s personal manager, picked up her room phone on the second ring, but before she could get it to her ear, “Where in the goddamn hell is Trish?” blasted from the receiver. She struggled to gather her thoughts. “Oh, hi, Danielle, I was just going to call you. With the bad weather and all, I was unsure where you’d be shooting.”

“Trish can’t just crawl into a limo and ride until it gets to our location? Anyway, cut the crap, Leah, it’s obvious you don’t know where she is either.” Film director Danielle Stokes’ voice pierced like a fire alarm.

“What do you mean, I don’t know where she is . . .”

“Like I said, Leah, you’re doing a miserable job covering Trish’s ass. I’ve got a note from her asking me to ‘shoot around her.’ Shoot around her, my ass! I might shoot *her*. The weather partially fucked today, and now Trish totally fucked it. This is going to cost me about fifty grand. For nothing! I need to know what’s going on.”

“Danielle, I think you’re over reacting here. I mean, she probably just had a couple of things to do. She’ll show up soon.”

“She doesn’t have ‘a couple of things’ to do today. She’s got one fucking thing to do! Make this goddamn movie!” Danielle paused to get a breath. “I’m calling Rod when I hang up and tell him he better catch up on his lawyer’s retainer because he’s going to need him if this

happens again.”

“For God’s sake, don’t get Rod involved in this. You know how those two can get. Just give me a little time to sort this thing out. I’ll call you back later.” The thought of Rod Blitzer, Trish’s agent, coming to town made her eyes dilate. She had seen the two of them go at each other too many times. “Danielle? You there?” There was no answer.

Leah Armour knew the signs. Trish Lowe was the third client for whom she had worked as a personal manager. Leah’s previous two Hollywood stars had proved to be Roman candles glowing brightly before self-destructing. But Trish was the real thing. Trish was worth saving even if Rod Blitzer sometimes seemed bent on destroying Leah’s charge.

Blitzer, wanting to capitalize on her current popularity, had pushed Trish into six years of end-to-end movie shoots in far away places. The obligatory firestorm publicity tours from each film overlaid each current shooting. Rod’s smile broadened as his fifteen-percent fees mounted, but the grind left Trish exhausted, generally unhappy, and often depressed. At age twenty-nine Trish had the potential for a self-abusive lifestyle hovering over her like Los Angeles smog. The ego boost of being adored by half the free world’s men had disappeared long ago, and her last significant other and her Malibu Beach house sanctuary were distant memories of paradise lost to the endless grind of movie making.

Even before the Texas shoot began, Leah knew Trish needed a diversion. It wasn’t Malibu, but the Texas beach was only thirty minutes away, and Leah was told of a state park on Mustang Island.

“You understand what I’m trying to do here?” Leah asked Park Ranger Jeffrey Randall.

“Yes ‘um. You want me to ride herd on Trish Lowe, the movie actress, right?”

“Well, that’s one way to say it, I guess, but mostly I want you to make sure she can come here on her own and know she won’t be disturbed. Can you do that?” Leah asked.

“How much will I have to pay you?” Ranger Jeffrey smiled and adjusted his sunglasses.

“Actually, I was thinking I would pay you.”

“The Great State of Texas pays me so handsomely, it’ll be a pleasure to see Miss Lowe is safe as in the arms of Jesus here in Mustang Island State Park.” Ranger Jeffrey tipped his regulation western hat.

“You realize if anyone hears about this, your park will be a mob scene, right?”

“Then this will be our little secret, won’t it?” Ranger Jeffrey leaned forward and whispered.

When Leah completed the Mustang Island Park arrangements, she anticipated with pleasure loading the movie star into her convertible, driving her to the beach hideaway, and basking in the excitement and pleasure it gave her friend and employer.

Until today Leah Armour had felt good about Trish’s demeanor on this picture. Their last picture was a trial by fire, with Trish showing violent mood swings triggered by the inane story line of yet another puff piece called *Passing Fantasy*. They barely made it through with cast and crew relationships intact, but Trish did seem to enjoy the love scenes with the co-star.

With five hours of daylight left, Leah wrestled with what to do. A police report on a missing Trish Lowe and the CBS, ABC and NBC News jets would flock to Corpus Christi International along with all the “talking head” cable networks.

Leah phoned Mustang Island State Park. “Jeffrey, you know where Trish is?”

“I haven’t seen her, Miss Armour,” Ranger Jeffrey replied. “Why, what’s up?”

“We’re trying to reach her, but we’re not sure where she is.”

“You think there’s a problem?”

“Don’t even think about it, Jeffrey, but could you check around for me?”

Three cigarettes later, Jeffrey called Leah back, “Miss Armour, she’s not in the park, that’s for sure. But the ranger in the entrance booth thought he saw her red convertible roar past, headed toward Port Aransas about nine o’clock this morning.”

“No one has seen her since then?”

“No, Ma’am. I’m off duty now. You want me to look for her in Port Aransas?”

“That would be great,” Leah replied, “but no need to talk about this, right?”

Ranger Jeffrey turned onto Park Road 361 and drove the speed limit for the thirteen miles into Port Aransas. The red convertible would be a beacon in the small fishing village, but no such luck. Heading back out Alister Street, he turned onto Beach Street and drove to the water, down the beach to the next access road, back to the highway, and continued zigzagging back and forth between highway and beach toward the state park. He again headed toward the water at Fish Pass Road, where he found the vacant convertible axle-deep in the sand at the end of the pavement. He radioed back to the park and ordered the tow truck to retrieve the car and haul it back to the park for safekeeping, and set out to look for Trish.

Chapter 4

An awkward silence hung in the beach house air. Chris pointed to Trish's jogging clothes. "You might be more comfortable in something beside soggy Spandex. I might have something that fits you,"

"Chris, I'm gonna worry about you if you have a closet full of women's clothes." Trish crossed her arms and looked down her nose.

"I guess that would seem a little different. They're actually not mine, but they might fit you." Chris returned her smile.

"You been holding out on me? You have a girl friend out here in the boonies?"

"Not really." He turned to look for the promised clothes before his expression gave him away. Rummaging through the clothes in the storage closet, he found a smallish pair of cutoffs and a blouse. Trish accepted them with appreciation and went to the bathroom to change. "Use anything in there you need," he offered. Apparently, she needed a shower and hair dryer by the sound of it. He hoped there was a clean towel.

He busied himself with lunch, first lighting the butane grill on the deck and then gathering the ingredients for a salad from the refrigerator. The red fish filets of that morning's catch were basted in tarragon butter, salt and peppered, and placed on the grill after the flame was adjusted. Returning to the kitchen he hand broke the romaine lettuce, sliced tomatoes and

avocados, and placed two French rolls in the toaster oven to warm.

He came through the deck door with a platter of grilled fish as Trish emerged from the bathroom. Her efforts paid big dividends, and the sight of her jarred him to a halt. He stared at her perfect shape, her perfect tan, her black hair groomed into a ponytail, and the benign aura of innocence radiating through her eyes and smile. God, what's happening here? What am I doing? He thought.

“Better?” She made a small curtsy

“Sorry. I guess I was staring.” He continued to the kitchen.

“I'm really hungry,” Trish said. “All the excitement this morning gave me an appetite, and the smell of that grilled fish is killing me.”

Chris sat the fish, the salad, and hot crusty French rolls on the table. He poured white wine into their glasses. “This little French Sancerre should go well with the fish.”

Her expression turned to astonishment as she surveyed the meal. The aroma of tarragon butter wafted from the fish as Trish picked up her fork. “Excuse me if I don't talk for the next few minutes.”

Chris watched, amused at her obvious pleasure. She continued eating, and he poured a second glass of wine. Trish looked up long enough to say, “You're different.”

“Because I can cook?”

“No, I mean about me. You knew who I was all along, and you didn't . . . go crazy. I mean, get silly about it.”

“You didn't look dangerous. Besides, being naked got me a little off balance. Normally, I'm not so hospitable.” He finally took his first bite of food.

“Really? That's surprising.” Smile lines appeared at the corners of her eyes.

“I’m a certified recluse.” He lifted his glass in a salute.

“Who certifies recluses in these parts? The county? The Great State of Texas?” She laughed, and the smile lines appeared again.

“The people I guess. If they see less of you than they think they should, you are certified as a recluse — or worse.”

“Well, Chris the Recluse, you really are different. Delightful, actually.” She looked at her host across the small table with a predatory glint in her eyes. She felt comfortable, maybe even drawn to this older man. “How long have you lived here?” she asked.

“A long time.” He looked out the window to avoid eye contact as his guilt tumbled back through time, as it always did with questions about his former life.

She wanted to know what he’d been like at her age, thirty something years ago, but asked instead, “What did you do before that?”

“I lived in a lot of places and did a lot of things I’ve tried to forget.” He again avoided eye contact that might be a window into what lurked inside.

The wine, the laughter, the meal, the day, and the man all made Trish feel cozy. Warm and protected. Safe. She recovered from her reverie enough to feel herself blushing. “Ah . . . well, Chris the Recluse, what do we do now?”

“You’ve got a car stuck in the sand. People are probably worried about you,” he said.

“My car! Damn, I forgot all about it.” she said, “Can we get it out?”

"It'll take some digging."

"Should we drive into town and get a tow truck?"

"No car, remember?"

"No car! Right." Her brow furrowed. "Here we go again. How do you live out here in the

middle of nowhere with no phone and no transportation?”

“A friend helps me with my mail and supplies . . . things I need.”

“This must be a really good friend. You don’t want for much here.” She gestured around the room.

“I guess I’m lucky that way. Actually, most of this was here. A friend of mine drank himself to death, and left his place to me.” Chris moved uneasily.

“What a sad thing.” Her eyes showed concern. “Living here in this wonderful spot and not enjoying it. How sad.”

“Oh, he enjoyed it all right. He just enjoyed it a little too much.”

“Maybe that’s even sadder.” She brightened and added, “Like I say, Chris the Recluse, what do we do now?” She knew the answer before she asked. It would not be long before they loosed the hounds on her.

“Two choices. We could hike down to the car with boards and shovels and dig it out. . . .”

“Or?”

“There’ll be a Coast Guard helicopter patrolling every morning. We flag it down, and they take you back to town.” He stared at the floor, seeming uneasy over the suggestion of her sleeping over.

Maybe I might make it until tomorrow morning, she thought. She looked at his averted eyes and uneasy demeanor and thought; I wonder how Woody Allen would write this? Before she answered, she heard footsteps vibrating the dune walkway, and she glanced out the front door to see Ranger Jeffrey walking up from the beach, his Stetson set purposefully above his dark tinted aviator’s glasses. He was tall and just missed being in good shape with a slight bulge above the big belt buckle of his holster belt. His uniform trousers were pressed into a razor

crease that wrinkled only slightly at the intersection with his cowboy boots that somehow escaped collecting any sand from the beach.

“The cavalry is here,” Chris said just as Jeffrey stepped onto the deck.

“Chris?” Jeffrey called as he approached the door.

“Come on in, Jeff.”

In the time it took Jeffrey’s eyes to adjust to the dimness, Trish stood and moved into the living area. “Boy, am I glad to see you, Miss Lowe! I was sure hoping I’d find you here. I saw your car, and I tracked you this way.”

“It’s good to see you, Jeffrey.” Trish smiled as she greeted him. “I guess I got in a little trouble here today.”

“Yes’um, there’s a surefire storm brewing with Ms. Leah. She called about an hour’n-a-half ago a might bit worried about you.” Ranger Jeffrey removed his hat as he spoke. “You want me to radio back and have them call Ms. Leah and tell her you’re all right?”

“That’s not necessary, Jeffrey, but can you help us get the car out so I can get back to town?” she asked.

“Oh, no worry there, they’ve towed it back to the park by now.” He smiled with pride. “Probably washed it too.”

Trish turned to Chris and said, “Well, Chris the Recluse, it looks like the curtain comes down on one of life’s little dramas. You were a lifesaver today for many reasons.”

“Sorry I wasn’t more help to you.” He shrugged. “You two know each other?”

Trish responded first. “Jeffrey has been a great deal of help to me during the filming.”

“The filming?” Chris looked puzzled.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re ‘Chris the Recluse,’ you wouldn’t know we’re shooting a movie

over in Corpus.”

“Chris doesn’t read newspapers,” Jeffrey said.

Chris mumbled, “There was something on television, now that you remind me.”

An embarrassed silence broke when Trish said, “Well, I guess it’s time.” She hugged her host, kissed his cheek, grabbed her beach tote that was bulging with her wet clothes, and walked out the door. When she reached the dune walkway, she turned and asked Ranger Jeffrey to wait, ran back into the house, and kissed Chris on the lips, startling him enough that he rocked back on his heels and had to grab the doorjamb to keep from falling.

When they reached mid-span of the dune walkway, Jeffrey turned and with a big smile and thumbs up shouted, “See you soon, Chris . . . The Recluse,” and he and Trish disappeared over the dunes.

Jeffrey said nothing as they drove down the beach, as Trish seemed deep in thought. Turning onto Fish Pass Road, he finally said, “You were pretty lucky today. You coulda’ had a long hike.”

“Yeah, Chris helped a lot.”

“That’s where you got lucky!” Jeffrey replied.

“How’s that?” She turned with a questioning look.

“You got inside his house. Few have had that honor since he moved in there years ago.”

The Bronco had turned onto the highway and gained speed before Trish asked, “So you know Chris well?”

“Yes’em, I do his errands for him,” he said. “He pays me for it, but I’d do it for nothing just to get to talk to him. He’s different.”

“What’s his last name?”

“He didn’t tell you? It’s Maven,” Jeffrey answered.

“Chris . . . topher . . . Maven?” She sat silently for a while. “ ‘Sand poetry?’ I just spent the day with Christopher Maven and didn’t know it? The bastard didn’t even tell me. Shit! How on earth did Christopher Maven end up living on a deserted beach in the middle of nowhere?”

Jeffrey explained a guy named Osborn Holmes who was anything but a recluse had owned the house up until about eight or ten years ago. Osborn gave huge beach parties open to anyone who wanted to party until they dropped. Jeffrey added, “If you believe the Osborn Holmes legend he was the original party animal. But he got sick and somehow Chris ended up taking care of him. Osborn died and left Chris the house.”

“And Chris has just lived on the beach since. Like a hermit?”

“Yes’em, old Chris is really different that way,” Jeffrey added without looking at her.

“God, that is *really* different.” She sat in contemplation. “But yet . . .how many times have I wanted to run away and hide?”

They rode for a while before Trish turned to Jeffrey. “Jeff, are you married?”

“Sorta.” He shrugged by way of explanation.

“Sorta?” Trish looked puzzled. “How can you be ‘sorta’ married?”

“Connie, my wife, and I have our good times and our bad. We’re having a bad time right now, and she moved home to her folks in San Antonio.” Jeffrey looked away from Trish.

“How much does a Park Ranger make these days? If you don’t mind saying.”

“About 35K, with some extra shifts.” He gave a little snort at what he knew to be a paltry sum.

“Would another 10K help you and Connie have a better time?”

“It sounds interesting. Why would you pay me 10K?”

“For doing some things and not doing others. For instance, you must forget everything that happened today. Never mention Christopher to Leah, and for God’s sake, never mention to another human being that Trish Lowe spent time in Christopher’s place.”

Leah Armour gritted her teeth and reached for the phone to call Danielle about a missing Trish Lowe, when it rang. She grabbed it from the cradle in mid-ring, “Speak to me!”

“Ms. Leah, it’s Jeffrey. You don’t need to worry.”

“Thank God, you found Trish?”

“No ma’am, not exactly, but I found where she was. She had a few drinks at Pelican’s Landing, and the bartender said she left about thirty minutes ago saying she needed to get back to town. She’ll be there pretty quick,” Jeffrey assured her.

“What a relief! You sure she’s coming back here?”

“Ma’am, I really don’t think you need to worry.”

Leah reluctantly put the phone in its cradle.

Trish waved again to Ranger Jeffrey and the state park crew from her top-down convertible as she turned onto the exit road. She was taken by the serenity of the park’s wetlands. The air was cool, and the sun was low on the horizon, silhouetting the spartina grass and the statue-like wading birds staring into their reflections on the mirrored surface of the bay flats. The air was heavy with the musty marsh smell of creation, and Trish took in a deep satisfied breath. If there were only a way to bottle this quietude, she thought. When things got too hectic, I could open a jar and pour the calm over me like a healing balm.

Her mind drifted back to the day she'd just spent with Christopher Maven – an enjoyable day like none in recent memory. Certainly since Rick. Her hand rubbed her brow involuntarily at remembering Rick Gooden, Ph D. They had met on the set of her fourth movie, a medical thriller about body organs harvested from kidnap victims held in comatose states by criminal doctors. Dr. Gooden carried the reputation as the leading organ transplant surgeon in California and was hired as technical advisor for the surgery scenes.

At forty, he was almost twice Trish's age and carried the self-assured bearing that his medical acclaim afforded. Handsome enough to be in movies himself, he caught Trish's eye on his first visit to the set. Their relationship blossomed to the point that Trish felt they might spend their lives together. But the tabloids and gossip columnists somehow caught scent of the relationship and built it into headline coverage.

Trish had known that this new world the doctor found himself in made him uncomfortable. She'd tried all the celebrity tricks to keep their lives private, but the tabloids still blasted out headlines of her every move, as if someone were trying to disrupt their relationship.

"Trish's Doc Dates Nurse," the headline and photos still burned in her memory. She knew it was just tabloid bullshit, but Rick's fury at the lie lasted for days. Then, "Doc is Up to No-Gooden," blasted from the cover to the *National Investigator* along with a picture of Rick with a nurse, both in scrubs. "Jesus Christ, Trish, we're in scrubs on the way to the operating room for crying out loud. What are these fucking idiots talking about." Rick was pissed off beyond consolation.

The media smelled blood and circled the couple for the kill. "Doc Drops Trish," was a tabloid self-fulfilling prophecy. Trish knew what was coming when Rick sat her down to talk, "I just can't function professionally with all this media bullshit going on. Our lives are just too

different.”

The bone aching hurt of Rick’s loss sent her to her only stint on a psychiatrist’s couch. Little by little she recovered, but the emotional scar left her restless and uneasy about Hollywood life, and a day like today made her yearn for something more satisfying.

She had made her way up South Padre Island Drive and down Bayshore Drive to downtown Corpus Christi in the calm of her reverie. Turning into the hotel parking lot she saw Leah waving her arms like she was doing jumping jacks. Trish said aloud, “Welcome back to the real world.”

Chapter 5

“They did what!” District Attorney Romney Anderson of the County of Marin, California, rocked forward in his overstuffed executive chair so violently he found himself standing. Assistant District Attorney Sid Blevins jumped back, fearing a physical attack, but recovered to answer, “The Army’s Judge Adjutant General’s Office remanded the case to us to handle under state criminal law.”

“For Christ’s sake, didn’t it happen on Fort Baker property? They still own the Marin Headlands, don’t they? I mean, the bastard was trespassing on government property, right?” DA Anderson’s stubby arms flailed about for emphasis.

“They say it’s a civilian matter and no concern of theirs.” Blevins flinched again.

DA Anderson, who was on the last year of his four year term after election in 1962, moved to his office window of the Frank Lloyd Wright – designed Marin County Civic Center and looked down Civic Center Drive toward Lagoon Park. The park was already filled with hippies attending a rock concert billed as the “Marin Love In.” He asked rhetorically, “How in God’s name did this bunch of social trash get permission to use the Lagoon Park for their sex and drug orgy? It looks like every hippie in San Francisco and Sausalito is there.”

Blevins moved to the window, looked over Anderson’s shoulder, and saw young girls dressed in long flimsy dresses, some with flower wreaths in their hair, hugging every longhaired boy in sight. Rock music blared from speakers powerful enough to knock Jericho’s walls down at half volume. Many of the kids sat silently stoned. Between each song others chanted endlessly

about giving love a chance.

Anderson frowned and pointed out the window. “I’m sick to death of this “flower power,” hippie bullshit. The whole thing flies in the face of our cultural values. It’s anarchy!”

“At least they’re not violent.” Blevins had to step back to avoid an elbow as Anderson wheeled to face him.

“Not violent? Trust me! They will be before it’s all over! They represent the beginning of the end of our society!” Anderson moved back to his chair and sat in silent contemplation. “I have one year to get re-elected” He was thinking aloud. “Cleaning up this Hippie mess might just be the way to get it done.” He looked up at Sid Blevins, “Swear out a warrant for “Murder One” on this guy, Marvin Christofferson.”

“Murder One?” Blevins said in disbelief. “Isn’t that a little stiff? Not to mention hard to prove?”

“Hell no, it isn’t! There’s no question he did it. We only have to prove motive.”

“That’s what I mean.” Blevins flinched again and added, “There is one complication with the case though.”

“What complication?”

“Lesa Tolivar was carrying a child in the third trimester.”

Anderson leaped from his chair ecstatic. “Even better. Swear out a warrant for two counts of “Murder One.”

The assistant DA picked up his briefcase as if to leave, then turned back. “You know he’ll plead ‘not guilty.’ You’ll bargain that down to ‘Reckless Endangerment’, or ‘Manslaughter’, and that’ll be probated. That’s if we can even get a conviction, which I doubt.”

“We’ll make an example out of this guy,” Anderson said. “We’ll fuck him around so

badly every hippie in Marin County will be packing back to San Francisco. Drive the fucking hippies out of Marin and I'll be re-elected in a landslide.”

“But . . .” Blevins began.

“No buts about it! Just get this guy arrested! Today!” Anderson plopped back in his chair looking like he had just hit the Lotto, and Blevins turned on his heel and stalked from the room

The fog had retreated back out to sea, and the sun shown brightly on a cloudless morning. Sid Blevins viewed the remnants of the previous day's Love In as he drove toward Marin General Hospital. The warrants for the arrest of Marvin Christofferson were in his briefcase. He shook his head in disbelief at the number of kids ragged out by a long sleepless night, overindulging on alcohol and marijuana, and dulled by sensory overload. They lounged about the streets trying to collect themselves sufficiently to make the trek back to San Francisco's Haight Asbury District. Some held up destination signs in the hope of hitching a ride.

The paddy wagon with its two officers was already stationed at the front door of the hospital when Blevins parked his car at the No Parking curb. The three walked to the Psychiatric Ward, and, after a short discussion with the administration office, Blevins signed the release form for police custody of Marvin Christofferson while the two officers looked on with little interest. The attendant behind the desk stamped the documents, handed a copy to an orderly, and returned to his paper shuffling. The orderly took the three of them down the hall past a row of doors with only small, covered viewing portals from which issued both subdued moans and howls of desperation. They passed through a door into a recreation room where patients moved about in drugged stupors. The room's appearance, intended to be bright and cheerful, became instead an institutional burlesque of anything that might lift a patient's spirits. The orderly

looked around the room and said, “He’s usually in here, but I don’t see him.”

“Maybe he went back to his room,” Blevins said.

The four set off further down the hall where the doors had double locks and windows reinforced with imbedded wire. The orderly looked through the window of Christofferson’s room, and, not seeing him, said, “The door to his john is closed. Maybe he’s in there.”

The orderly tried his key, but the door was unlocked. The three went in, and the orderly checked the bathroom and found clouds of steam rising from behind the shower curtain. “Hurry up, Christofferson. There are some people here to see you.” The orderly stepped outside the bathroom to wait.

After several moments of irritation, Blevins went into the bathroom and pulled back the shower curtain to an empty shower. “Shit! The guy’s blown,” Blevins shouted. “Anywhere else he might be?”

The orderly shrugged and the uniformed officers ran from the room and down the hall in both directions. “Come back here you idiots,” Blevins shouted after the two. “You don’t even know who you’re looking for!”

“Apparently he just walked out of the place,” Blevins explained to the District Attorney.

“We didn’t guard his room?” Anderson asked. “A perp can just come and go as he wishes in that place, for God’s sake?”

“There was no reason to guard him until I served the warrant for his arrest. He was only a patient with a mental meltdown,” Blevins answered.

Anderson walked to his window to gain some self-control and stared for several minutes in contemplation. “If he doesn’t know we want him, he probably went back to his place in

Sausalito.”

“I could get a plainclothesman and check it out,” Blevins offered, hoping to ward off something more dramatic like an “All Points Bulletin.”

“Yes, check it out.” Anderson returned to his desk “I want this guy back here.”

Chapter 6

Lottie Langton busied herself wiping down the bar of her open air “Backyard Bar and Grill” in preparation for the evening’s business. The Backyard had a central octagonal bar with a palm frond “palapa” roof shielding it from the day’s intermittent showers, but the openness and the wind was a problem for lightweight napkins and swizzle sticks.

The Backyard, the main watering hole for both locals and the lucky tourists who stumbled in, was adjacent to the Port Aransas Harbor on Mustang Island where gleaming sport fishing cabin cruisers and sailboats rocked and strained at their moorings. At night the harbor lights, the reflections from other restaurants, and bars lining the harbor and the distant lighthouse on Lydia Ann Channel provided a backdrop that said, “It’s happening here!”

Lottie already had cleaned the umbrella tables and set out the salt, pepper, and sugar shakers. She refilled the charcoal grill with new briquettes in anticipation of the demand for shrimp, chicken and beef kebabs that night.

After restocking the condiment trays, filling the straw and napkin holders on the bar, and weighting them with shot glasses, she turned to the beer box, which the last night’s business had emptied. It was not her favorite job, but she doubled over the side of the beer box, head and shoulders groping into its bowels to clean it. Her butt threatened a jail break as it strained against

her short shorts.

Jeffrey walked up to the bar and said, “Lottie Langton, why I’d recognize that face anyplace. I want to remember you just this way forever.”

“Very funny, Jeffrey!” Her voice echoed out of the beer box. Her cleaning continued unabated, so Ranger Jeffrey sat on a bar stool immediately opposite her posterior to fully appreciate the view. Shortly, she emerged from the box, wiping perspiration from her brow with her forearms and removing her rubber gloves. She was one of those rare island women who after thirty-nine years remained unblemished by sun, salt air, controlled substances, and the rigors of island nightlife. Her slightly tanned complexion served to accent her poodle cut blond hair surrounding a beautiful face from which beamed vivid blue eyes and a smile of perfect white teeth.

“You’re running a little bit late today.” He leered.

“No, Jeffrey, you’re a little bit early.” She leaned against the beer box to catch her breath from bending over.

“I’ve done my good deed for the day, so I dropped by for my reward,” he said smiling.

“And what might that be?”

“How about your pledge of undyin’ love followed by wild Latin sex while shouting, ‘Ole!’”

“You’re married, Jeffrey, remember? What’s your second choice?” Her manner was tolerant.

“Actually, it might be time to launch into the relationship of unbridled lust we’re always talking about.”

“*You’re* always talking about!”

“How about a beer, then?” he said with resignation. She rolled a long neck in a napkin before opening and setting it on the bar. “Anyway, my marriage is more like the measles than matrimony.” He looked down at his beer bottle before taking his first long pull on it.

“I suspect Connie might have even stronger feelings on that subject. So what was the good deed you’re so proud of?” She pulled a roll of coins from the cash bag.

“I rescued that person I can’t talk about from the clutches of old Chris.” He chortled in anticipation of her reaction.

“What? Trish Lowe was in Chris’s house? Chris the recluse?” She wheeled around, showering the nickels she was dumping into the register over the floor.

“SHHHHH! You know you can’t say that name out loud!” Jeffrey beamed at his “gotcha!”

“Nobody gets into Chris’ house! I mean, what was she doing there? I thought you guarded her down at the park?” Her eyes narrowed to slits.

“For some reason she decided to launch out on her own, and she got stuck in the sand at the end of Fish Pass Road. When I found her car, I followed her tracks down toward Chris’ and there she was chowin’ down on grilled red fish, swilling white wine, and purrin’ like a kitten.”

“Chris fed her?” she shouted, making a threatening gesture. “He cooked for her?”

“It was the hospitable thing to do, right?” Jeffrey was having too much fun.

She slammed a roll of quarters on the edge of the cash drawer so hard it left a mark.

“The son-of-a-bitch never cooked for me!”

Somehow Trish avoided cast, crew, and autograph hounds in the lobby and halls of the Omni upon her return. Ranger Jeffrey had warned that Leah was urgently looking for her, so the note

on the bed from Leah was not a surprise. Moving to the desk chair she read the note which detailed Danielle's reaction to Trish's absence and the threat to call Rod. She slumped to her elbows on the desk, feeling the noose of responsibility tightening around her again.

The cell phone caller list showed four calls from Danielle, five from Leah, and one from Rod. "Oh, my God." She said aloud as she stared blankly at the phone trying to put together a response and damage control plan. The room phone on the desk rang, startling her enough to drop the cell phone. The phone rang three times before she drew in a breath, bracing for the caller's verbal blast, she said, "Yeah!"

"Hi. Pumpkin, it sounds like I called at a bad time." Her Dad's voice on the phone was a tonic for the soul.

"Hi, Pop!" Her excitement sparked through the phone line. "You couldn't have called at a better time."

"You don't sound that great. Is everything all right?" She could always rely on his concern, the harbor against any storm that threatened. Years of searching had not produced another rock like her dad, someone to wrap her in a cocoon of tenderness and honesty when she felt vulnerable and afraid.

"Oh yeah, everything's great. It's just good to hear your voice." She almost whispered her answer.

"You sound pretty low. Is the picture going ok?"

"The picture's going fine, Pop." Trish squirmed a little on the edge of the bed, changed hands with the phone, and thought of the trouble she was in and everything still in front of her before the end of the filming.

"Is this one better than the last one? What was the name, "Passing Flatulence"?"

“Fantasy, Pop. ‘*Passing Fantasy*’.” She grinned into the phone.

“I just remember it stunk up the theater.” She could picture him smiling as he said it.

“Don’t hold back, Pop, just tell me what you really thought of the movie.” Needling each other never grew old and always brought her back to reality. There was no man more meaningful in her life than her dad.. No man who simply accepted her for the person she really was, and loved her for it.

“Oh, and that square-faced guy? The one with the shaggy blond hair, you know, he was always rubbing on you. I didn’t like him at all. I think his name is Pitts or something.”

“Brad Pitt, Pop. He’s ok. A pretty hot guy actually.”

“Course you were great as usual, but even you couldn’t save that stinker.” He paused briefly and added. “All seriousness aside, you don’t sound like you cheerful self.”

“Maybe I’m a little tired.” Constant sixteen-hour filming days had toughened her, but she felt herself fraying around the edges.

“Tired, or weary?”

“You’re amazing. You’re right, of course. I’m pretty much weary of everything I do. I know I’m luckier than I’ll ever deserve to be, and I know I ought to be deliriously happy.”

“How long has it been since you got a little?” His chuckle rippled over the phone.

“DAD!! Be serious here!” A brief smile flickered across her face until she realized she couldn’t remember the last time she had sex.

“I’m being serious. I don’t care how many movies you make, or how much money, or how famous you are, that’s no assurance of happiness. You gotta love someone or something more than yourself to be happy. I vote for *someone*, because if you get lucky, he’ll love you the same way.”

“Trust me, finding that someone is not as easy as it sounds. I can’t seem to find somebody like you.” Her eyes glistened with emotion.

“Pumpkin, I think you deserve somebody better’n me.” His appreciation of his daughter’s compliment was apparent in his voice.

Trish always put off asking about her mom, because she knew the answer. But now it was time. She sighed as she asked, “How’s Mom?”

There was a pause as her father considered the question. “She has her good days and her bad. But she’s definitely slipping.”

“Could I talk to her?” Trish screwed up her face in the anticipation of a boxer hoping the next punch wouldn’t land.

“You can try, but I can’t promise anything. Hang on a minute, I’ll try to get her on the phone.” Trish heard the receiver rattle onto the table and sounds of her dad calling for her mother.

In a moment she heard, “Who? Who did you say it was?” Her mom was some distance from the phone still.

“Martha, it’s Trish. You remember Trish, your daughter, right? Trish wants to say hello.” Her father’s voice could be heard clearly in the background. The receiver clattered as someone picked it up.

After a pause a very tentative voice said, “Hel . . . Hello?”

Trish said, “Hi, Mom, it’s Trish.”

“Who?”

“Trish, your daughter. I just wanted to tell you I love you, Mom.”

“Trish . . . I had a daughter named Trish once.”

“That’s me, Mom, I’m Trish your daughter.”

After a pause Trish heard in the background, “There’s someone on here who says she’s my daughter, maybe you should talk to her.” Trish had difficulty maintaining her composure during the pause as her dad took back the phone receiver.

“Sorry, Pumpkin, this just isn’t a good day, I’m afraid.”

“I feel so helpless. I have all the money in the world, and it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing it can do to make Mom better.”

“I’m afraid that’s true.”

“Could we move her into a hospital or full-time care facility? Better still, move her to my Malibu house. She could enjoy the weather and walk on the beach.”

“She gets very upset in unfamiliar places, I’m afraid. Just taking her to the doctor makes her frantic.” Trish could hear resignation in her dad’s voice.

“Dad, at least let me get ‘round-the-clock help for you. An Alzheimer special care person or registered nurse. Somebody to help you out.”

“Pumpkin, we do just fine. I’ll admit sometimes it’s hard, but having strangers in the house would make Martha uncomfortable. She’s becoming suspicious, almost paranoid. She accused me of stealing her jewelry the other day.” Her dad chuckled.

“I’m sorry I’m not there to help out, but when this picture is finished I promise I will help you and Mom get through this.” Trish lowered her head and facial contortions almost gave way to sobbing before she could continue. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, Pumpkin. Now get your chin up off your chest, and get out there, and make good decisions.” Trish remembered her dad preceding her every teenage date with his mantra, “Have fun, but make good decisions.”

Good decisions, she thought, who decides what's good? I made a "good decision" this morning and had a wonderful day. Met a really interesting guy. Now everyone is on my case, and I have to feel bad. The cell phone broke her reverie. The Caller ID showed that Leah was on the line. She sighed and answered, "I guess Danielle is a little upset."

"Little upset? Try ballistic! Where the hell were you today?" Leah's voice was more that a little agitated.

"Jesus, Leah, you gonna bust my chops before Danielle has a go at me?"

Chapter 7

Chris sat at his desk, pen in hand, notebook at the ready, not writing. The day's events crowded out his concentration. Trish Lowe seemed pervasive even in her absence. Just before sundown he wrote for several minutes; then he walked to the beach with the notebook. He searched for a likely place and wrote in the surf-packed sand:

The void of loss seems timeless.

Your memory sifts through the fingers of my soul

Like dry beach sand drifting away on the wind.

Can even perfect wine refill a bottomless cup?

He was not hungry after their late lunch, and weariness sent him to bed shortly after dark. This was the first night of demon less sleep in weeks, and Chris sank lower and lower into the shapeless realm of silence and calm.

A thunderclap hinged him at the waist, and he awoke sitting and glanced around confused. Another cold front had pushed its way into the coastal night, engaging in mortal combat the warm moist air from the south. The electrical smell of ozone's negative ions was the

fallout of a thunder cannonade. Lightening flared across the sky. Wind rocked the house, and rain pelted the roof — gently at first, then in torrents.

He descended the loft stairs and walked onto the deck, standing protected by the overhang and he surveyed the night. The gods are angry, he thought. Spray from the surf crested the dunes to become part of the torrent. Lightning struck the water and ignited the whole scene in amorphous blues and greens. In the eerie light he saw the beach awash in surf — rain shivering and crackling in the reflection of the electric sky. He shuddered and went back inside.

At the kitchen counter he poured himself a shot of Don Sergio Tequila and downed it. Simultaneously, a power outage plunged him into darkness and the self-doubt of cause and effect.

Sitting at the bar, he lit a candle and concentrated on the mesmerizing flame as a distraction. Finally, he tossed down another tequila shot and waited for its effect. A moth appeared from the darkness and engaged in a dance with the flame. Hesitant at first it swooped and flitted at the fringes. Gaining more confidence it flew closer to the flame, drawn by its radiance, until it poised in flight ready to attain the flame's full glory, and Chris reached and snuffed the candle between his fingers.

Moving to the couch, he lay for a time disturbed and sleepless before the rhythmic rain and the tequila lulled him to sleep.

The morning dawned gloriously. Gulls circled in a blue, cloudless sky, and the surf, murky from the night's storm, undulated in tamed submission. The beach glistened pristine and inviting.

Four porpoise circled a school of whiting, that with great reluctance, paid the their breakfast tab.

Chris stumbled, sleep-weary, onto the deck just as the sun reached half-mast in the east.

He felt rested for the first time in weeks, but not at rest. A hollowness opened inside him, a void dug by recollection.

The loss of a poem, wrenched from the grasp of immortality by the elements, had sent him into a pall of depression in the past. It had taken him days to recover the loss of meaningful passages. But this morning's toll seemed less important. He felt a strange sense of replenishment, even anticipation.

Beach walkers are discouraged by a storm, but he went back in and put on his cutoffs anyway. He did not want a repeat of yesterday's towel problem.. "A swim might be the thing," he thought aloud. The crisp air sent him jogging into the water until he was waist-deep; he fell forward into smooth strokes powering him past the surf into the swells beyond. He swam south until the entrance to Fish Pass Road came into sight and pulled up to tread water when he saw the hood of Ranger Jeffrey's Bronco nose into the sand at the end of the road. It lurched through the loose sand and onto the surf hardpan and turned north.

An unscheduled visit, thought Chris, and he swam to shore.

The passenger-side window was down when he reached the Bronco, and Chris heard Jeff say, "It seems Chris the Recluse made quite an impression on Trish Lowe, considering I'm the one who rescued her. Hop in. I've been running all over town buying stuff Miss Lowe wanted you to have, and I'm making a delivery."

"I'm all wet and sandy . . . mess up your car." Chris pointed to the seat.

"Then open this one first," Jeff said. After digging around in the back seat, Jeffrey handed Chris a sack from what looked like a very pricey boutique.

"What's this stuff?" Chris asked skeptically, refusing the sack at first.

"Here, open it!" Jeffrey stuffed the box into Chris' hand.

Chris took the box from the sack and unwrapped it. It contained a beach towel with snaps down one edge designed to double as a wraparound. A note attached said, “Chris the Recluse, I thought this might come in handy. Thanks, Trish.”

“Dry off and get in. There’s a bunch of other stuff,” Jeff announced.

“I really don’t want a bunch of stuff from her. I just let her in the house. I didn’t help her at all.” Chris was backing away from the Bronco.

“Chris, quit being an asshole and just get in the car!” Jeffrey’s voice carried enough authority for Chris to oblige him.

Jeff stopped the Bronco when they reached the dune walkway and, opening the hatch door, pointed at two ice chests, a bag of groceries, and an Omni Hotel valet service wrap containing the shorts and shirt Trish had borrowed the day before. “Man, I don’t know what you did yesterday, but it sure worked. Miss Lowe said be sure you got this.”

A note monogrammed “TL” read, “Chris, it’s my turn to cook. How about tonight?”
Trish P.S. Since you didn’t dig my car out yesterday, how about digging a hole for a clambake?”

Jeff opened one of the ice chests. Two enormous lobsters swam in ice and salt water beside a sack of steamer clams. He said, “These bastards are big enough to put a saddle on.”

Chris stared at the two cautious lobsters swimming in the ice chest and said, “This is crazy. I’m not going to have a “clambake” with a stranger.

Jeff continued unloading Chris’s booty and grinned as he got back into his Bronco, “Have a great adventure with your new friend . . . Chris the Recluse!” The Bronco started to move away, then it stopped suddenly and backed up. Jeffrey held a cell phone out the window toward Chris. “I almost forgot this. Ms. Trish wanted you to have it. I think she wants to keep tabs on you.”

“I haven’t used a phone in years, and I’m not going to start now.” Chris held his palm out in rejection. Jeffrey hesitated a moment, but knew it was useless. He smiled at Chris and drove away.

Chris considered the two Igloo ice chests sitting on the sand and opened the lid of one. The doomed lobsters went into defensive mode, claws open and ready to do battle. When nothing threatened them, they seemed to return to their contemplation of how the clear vistas of the cold Atlantic waters had muddled into an opaque white cloud. Unlike the irrationally happy clams in their burlap bag, the lobsters knew something was up. Chris opened the lid of the second ice chest and saw it contained an assortment of dairy products and produce.

He walked around the white ice chests as if they were turds dropped from albino plastic elephants. The lobsters fell back into their defensive posture when he nudged the Igloo with his toe. There is a clear and present danger here, he thought. The overt act of friendship on this woman’s part was a Trojan horse in the guise of a friendly clam bake, and somewhere just out of sight was a huge Igloo cooler with his name on it, and the resurrection of everything he had tried for years to forget. “Nothing good can come of this,” he said aloud as he picked up the sack of groceries and the valet package and started over the dunes.

The two ice chests were magnetic. He sat at his desk, and his eyes drifted out the deck door to them. In the kitchen — the beached ice chests again. Even from the loft the ice chests tugged at him. Finally, leaning on the deck railing staring at the two ice chests still sitting on the beach, he thought, “Oh, what the hell!” Picking up a shovel he returned to the beach and dug at the edge of the surf. He lowered the lobster chest into the hole so that the surf just lapped salt water into it. “That should hold you until this evening,” he advised the lobsters and clams.

At the base of the dunes he dug another hole, and then walked the beach collecting

driftwood. He gathered dried seaweed, soaked it in the surf, and piled it next to the driftwood.

After surveying his work for a minute, he picked up the second ice chest and carried it into the kitchen.