

Horizons Past– Bill Stephens

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Horizons Past

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 that had been flushed out through them and were now 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 Maven. 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 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, and 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 re-form. 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, looked up at the roiling overcast, and said, “Not a chance!” The sky, turbulent with dark clouds, would make shooting today’s outdoor scenes impossible. The three weeks of filming since arriving in Corpus Christi, Texas, were blessed with great weather, and yesterday’s cloudless sky provided a perfect backdrop for movie making, but forget it today.

She sat on the edge of the bed and heaved a great sigh as restlessness settled over her. She knew the signs of “burnout” creeping into her psyche ever since the location shooting had started. “I’ve got to get out of here! At least for today.” she said aloud.

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 would 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 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 Maven. 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 to seventy 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 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 new 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 he arms like she was doing jumping jacks. Trish said aloud, “Welcome back to the real world.”