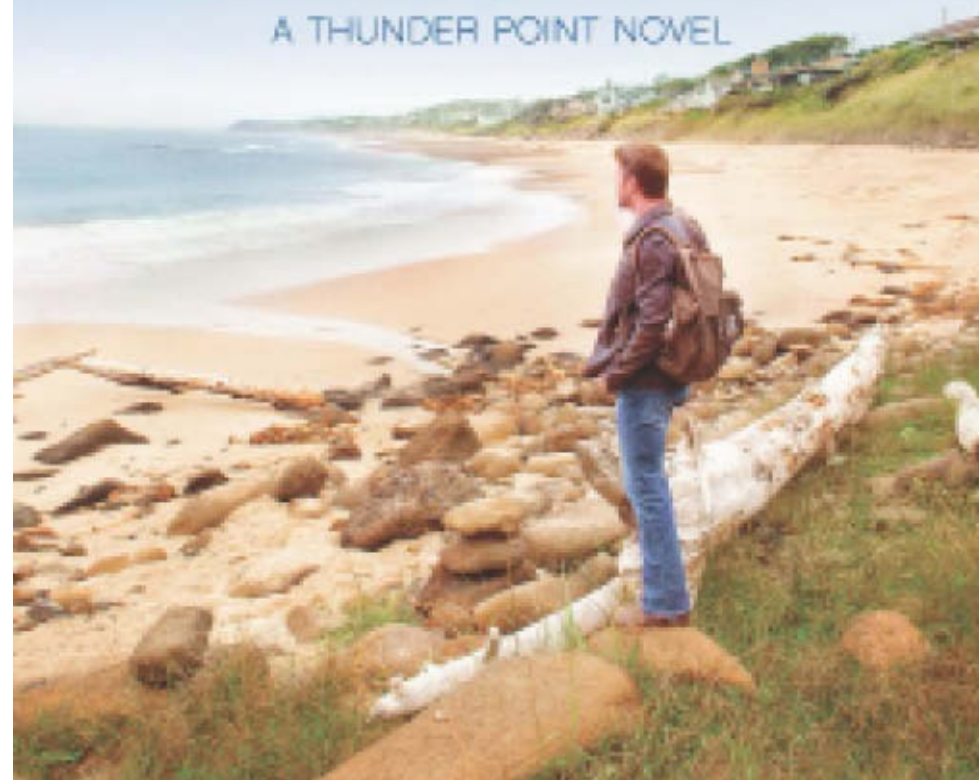


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A THUNDER POINT NOVEL



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THE WANDERER



To the magnificent Kristan Higgins,
who is beautiful inside and out.

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One

It took Hank Cooper almost eight hours to get from Virgin River to Thunder Point, Oregon, because he was towing his fifth wheel, a toy hauler. He pulled to the side of the road frequently to let long strings of motorists pass. Just prior to crossing the California/Oregon border, he stopped at a redwood tourist trap featuring gardens, souvenirs, wood carvings, a lunch counter and restrooms. Skipping the garden tour, he bought a sandwich and drink and headed out of the monument-size trees to the open road, which very soon revealed the rocky Oregon Coast.

Cooper stopped at the first outlook over the ocean and parked. His phone showed five bars and he dialed up the Coos County Sheriff's Department. "Hello," he said to the receptionist. "My name is Hank Cooper and I'm on my way to Thunder Point following a call from someone saying my friend, Ben Bailey, is dead. Apparently he left something for me, but that's not why I'm headed your way. The message I got was that Ben was killed, but there were no details. I want to talk to the sheriff. I need some answers."

"Hold, please," she said.

Well, that wasn't what he expected. He'd figured he'd leave a number and eat his lunch while he waited.

"Deputy McCain," said the new voice on the line.

"Hank Cooper here, Deputy," he said, and in spite of himself, he straightened and squared his shoulders. He'd always been resistant to authority, yet he also responded to it. "I was hoping to speak with the sheriff."

"I'm the deputy sheriff. The county sheriff's office is in Coquille. This is a satellite office with a few deputies assigned. Thunder Point is small—there's a constable but no other local law enforcement. The constable handles small disputes, evictions, that sort of thing. The county jail is in Coquille. How can I help you, Mr. Cooper?"

"I'm a friend of Ben Bailey and I'm on my way into town to find out what happened to him."

"Mr. Cooper, Ben Bailey's been deceased for more than a couple of weeks."

"I gather that. I just found out. Some old guy—Rawley someone—found a phone number and called me. He was killed, Rawley said. Dead and buried. I want to know what happened to him. He was my friend."

"I can give you the details in about ninety seconds."

But Cooper wanted to look him in the eye when he heard the tale. "If you'll give me directions, I'll come to the Sheriff's Department."

"Well, that's not necessary. I can meet you at the bar," the deputy said.

"What bar?"

"Ben's. I guess you weren't a close friend."

"We go back fifteen years but this is my first trip up here. We were supposed to meet with a third buddy from the Army in Virgin River for some hunting. Ben always said he had a bait shop."

"I'd say he sold a lot more Wild Turkey than bait. You know where Ben's place is?"

"Only sort of," Cooper said.

“Take 101 to Gibbons Road, head west. After about four miles, look for a homemade sign that says Cheap Drinks. Turn left onto Bailey Pass. It curves down the hill. You’ll run right into Bailey’s. Where do you think you’ll get there?”

“I just crossed into Oregon from California,” he said. “I’m pulling a fifth wheel. Couple of hours?”

“More like three. I’ll meet you there if nothing interferes. Is this your cell number?”

“It is,” he said.

“You’ll have good reception on the coast. I’ll give you a call if I’m held up.”

“Thanks, Deputy...what was it?”

“McCain. See you later, Mr. Cooper.”

Cooper signed off, slipped the phone into his jacket pocket and got out of the truck. He put his lunch on the hood and leaned against the truck, looking out at the northern Pacific Ocean. He’d been all over the world, but this was his first trip to the Oregon Coast. The beach was rocky and there were boulders two stories high sticking out of the water. An orange-and-white helicopter flew low over the water—Coast Guard HH-65 Dolphin, search and rescue.

For a moment he had a longing to be back in a chopper. Once he got this business about Ben straightened out, he might get to the chore of looking for a flying job. He’d done a number of things air-related after the Army. The most recent was flying out of the Corpus Christi port to offshore oil rigs. But after a spill in the Gulf, he was ready for a change.

His head turned as he followed the Coast Guard chopper across the water. He’d never considered the USCG. He was used to avoiding offshore storms, not flying right into them to pluck someone out of a wild sea.

He took a couple of swallows of his drink and a big bite of his sandwich, vaguely aware of a number of vehicles pulling into the outlook parking area. People were getting out of their cars and trucks and moving to the edge of the viewing area with binoculars and cameras. Personally, Coop didn’t really think these mountainous boulders, covered with bird shit, were worthy of a picture, even with the orange chopper flying over them. *Hovering* over them...

The waves crashed against the big rocks with deadly power and the wind was really kicking up. He knew only too well how dicey hovering in wind conditions like that could be. And so close to the rocks. If anything went wrong, that helicopter might not be able to recover in time to avoid the boulders or crashing surf. Could get ugly.

Then a man in a harness emerged from the helicopter, dangling on a cable. That’s when Cooper saw what the other motorists had seen before him. He put down his sandwich and dove into the truck, grabbing for the binoculars in the central compartment. He honed in on a boulder, a good forty or fifty feet tall, and what had been specks he now recognized as two human beings. One was on top of the rock, squatting to keep from being blown over in the wind. The other was clinging to the face of the rock.

Rock climbers? They both wore what appeared to be wet suits under their climbing gear. Thanks to the binoculars, he could see a small boat bouncing in the surf, moving away from the rock. There was a stray rope anchored to the rock and flapping in the breeze. The man who squatted on top of the boulder had issues with not only the crosswind but the helicopter’s rotor wash. And if the pilot couldn’t keep his aircraft stable, the EMT or rescue swimmer who dangled from the cable would slam into the rock.

“Easy, easy, easy,” he muttered to himself, wishing the crew could hear him.

The emergency medical tech grabbed on to the wall of the rock beside the stranded climber, stabilized himself with an anchor in the stone, and held there for a minute. Then the climber hoisted

himself off the wall of the rock and onto the EMT, piggyback to the front of the harnessed rescuer. Both of them were pulled immediately up to the copter via the cable and quickly yanked within.

“Yeah,” he whispered. Good job! He’d like to know the weight of that pilot’s balls—that was some fancy flying. Reaching the climber was the hard part. Rescuing the guy up top was going to be less risky for all involved. The chopper backed away from the rock slightly while victim number one was presumably stabilized. Then, slowly edging near the rock once more, hovering there, a rescue basket was deployed. The climber on top waited until the basket was right there before he stood, grabbed it and fell inside. As he was being pulled up, motorists around Cooper cheered.

Before the climber was pulled all the way into the chopper, the boat below crashed against the mountainous boulder and broke into pieces. It left nothing but debris on the water. These guys must have tried to anchor the boat to a rock on a side that wasn’t battered by big waves, so they could climb up, then back down. But once the boat was lost, so were they.

Who had called the Coast Guard? Probably one of them, from a cell phone. Likely the one on top of the rock, who wasn’t hanging on for dear life.

Everyone safely inside, the helicopter rose, banked and shot away out to sea.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes our matinee for today. Join us again tomorrow for another show, Coop thought. As the other motorists slowly departed, he finished his sandwich, then got back into his truck and headed north.

* * *

It was a good thing Cooper’s GPS was up-to-date, because Gibbons Road was unmarked. It was three hours later that Coop found himself on a very narrow two-lane road that went switchback-style down a steep hill. At a turnoff, there was only a sign that read Cheap Drinks, and an arrow pointing left. Very classy, he found himself thinking. Ben had never been known as what Cooper’s Southern grandmother had called “High Cotton.”

From that turnoff, however, he could see the lay of Thunder Point, and it was beautiful. A very wide inlet or bay, shaped like a *U*, was settled deeply into a high, rocky coastline. He could see Ben’s place, a single building with a wide deck and stairs leading down to a dock and the beach. Beyond Ben’s place, stretching out toward the ocean, was a completely uninhabited promontory. He sat there a moment, thinking about Ben’s patrons taking advantage of those cheap drinks and then trying to get back up to 101. This road should be named Suicide Trail.

On the opposite side of the beach was another promontory that reached out toward the ocean, this one featuring houses all the way to the point. Cooper could only imagine the drop-dead-gorgeous view. There was a marina on that promontory, and the town itself. Thunder Point was built straight up the hill from the marina in a series of steps. He could see the streets from where he was parked. Between Ben’s place and the town was only the wide, expansive beach. Looking down, he could see a woman in a red, hooded jacket and a big dog walking along the beach. She repeatedly threw a stick; the dog kept returning it. The dog was black and white, with legs like an Arabian colt.

The sun was shining and Cooper was reminded of one of Ben’s emails describing his home. *Oregon is mostly wet and cold all winter, except for one part around Bandon and Coos Bay that’s moderate almost year-round, sunny more often than stormy. But when the storms do come into Thunder Point over the ocean, it’s like one of the Seventh Wonders. The bay is protected by the hills and stays calm, keeping the fishing boats safe, but those thunderclouds can be spectacular....*

Then he saw not one but two eagles circling over the point on Ben’s side of the beach. It was a rare

and beautiful sight.

He proceeded to the parking lot, not entirely surprised to find the Sheriff's Department SUV already there and the deputy sitting inside, apparently writing something. He was out of the car and striding toward Cooper just a few seconds later. Cooper sized him up. Deputy McCain was a young man, probably mid-thirties. He was tall, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered—about what you'd expect.

Cooper extended a hand. "Deputy."

"Mr. Cooper, I'm sorry for your loss."

"What happened to Ben?"

"He was found at the foot of the stairs to the cellar, where he kept the bait tanks. Ben lived here—I had a couple of rooms over the bar. The doors weren't locked, but I don't think Ben ever locked up. There were no obvious signs of foul play, but the case was turned over to the coroner. Nothing was missing, not even the cash. The coroner ruled it an accident."

"But the guy who called me said he'd been killed," Cooper said.

"I think Rawley was upset. He was kind of insistent that Ben couldn't have fallen. But Ben had had a couple of drinks. Not nearly the legal limit, but he could've tripped. Hell, I've been known to trip on no alcohol at all. Rawley found him. Ben kept the money in a cash drawer in the cooler, and the money was still in its hiding place. The one strange thing is," the deputy said, scratching the back of his neck, "time of death was put at two in the morning. Ben was in his boxers, and Rawley insisted there's no reason he'd get out of bed on the second floor and head for the cellar in the middle of the night. Rawley might be right—except this could have been the night Ben heard a noise and was headed for the beach. Just in case you're wondering, there is no surveillance video. In fact, the only place in town that actually has a surveillance camera is the bank. Ben has had one or two characters in his place over the years, but never any real trouble."

"You don't think it's possible someone who knew the place decided to rob it after midnight? When Ben was vulnerable?"

"Most of Ben's customers were regulars, or heard about the place from regulars—weekend bikers, sports fishermen, that sort. Ben didn't do a huge business, but he did all right."

"On bait and Wild Turkey?"

The deputy actually chuckled. "Bait, deli, small bar, Laundromat, cheap souvenirs and fuel. I'd say most of all those things, the bar and deli probably did the lion's share of the business."

Cooper looked around the deputy's frame. "Fuel?"

"Down on the dock. For boats. Ben used to let some of his customers or neighbors moor alongside the dock. Sometimes the wait at the marina got a little long and Ben didn't mind if people helped themselves. Since he died and the place has been locked up, the boats have found other docks—probably the marina. Oh, he also had a tow truck that's parked in town, but he didn't advertise about it. That's it. There was no next of kin, Mr. Cooper."

"Who is this Rawley? The guy who called me?"

The deputy scrubbed off his hat and scratched his head. "You say you were good friends?"

"For fifteen years. I knew he was raised by his dad, that they had a bar and bait shop here on the coast. We met in the Army. He was a helicopter mechanic and everyone called him Gentle Ben. He was the sweetest man who ever lived, all six foot six of him. I can't imagine him standing up to a robber—not only would he hand over the money, he'd invite the guy to dinner."

"Well, there you go, you might not have the more recent facts, but you knew him all right. That's the thing that makes everyone lean toward accident. That, and the lack of evidence to the contrary. N

one would have to hurt Ben for a handout. You don't know about Rawley?"

Cooper just shook his head.

"Rawley Goode is around sixty, a vet with some challenging PTSD issues. He lives down the coast where he takes care of his elderly father, sort of. He's not real good around people. Ben gave him work. He helped out here, cleaned, stocked, ran errands, that sort of thing. He could serve customers, if no one expected conversation. People around here were used to him. I think he might've been homeless when Ben met him, but his father has lived around here a long time. Interesting guy, not that I can say I know him. Rawley found Ben."

"Are you sure Rawley didn't push him down the stairs?"

"Rawley's a skinny little guy. The coroner didn't find any evidence to suggest Ben had been pushed. And Rawley...he was dependent on Ben. When Ben died, there wasn't anyone for us to contact. But don't worry—the town gave Ben a decent send-off. He was well liked. There are better bars around here to hang out in, but people liked Ben."

"Yeah, I liked him, too," Cooper said, looking down. "There must've been a will or something. Rawley wasn't the most articulate guy on the phone, but he said Ben left something for me. Could be old pictures from our Army days or something. Who do you suppose I should see about that?"

"I'll make a few calls, check into that for you."

"Appreciate it. And maybe you could suggest a place to hook up the fifth wheel?"

"There are several decent spots along the coast for tourists—Coos Bay is a nice area. You planning to hang around?"

Cooper gave a shrug. "Maybe a few days, just long enough to talk to some of the folks who knew Ben, pick up whatever he left for me, pay my respects. I just want people to know—he had good friends. We didn't get together a lot, and it sounds like I didn't get a lot of inside information from Ben, but we were always in touch. And since I came all this way, I want to hear about him—about how people got on with him. You know?"

"I think I understand. This place is locked up. No one would care if you sat here for a while, while you look around at other possibilities. No hookup for your trailer, but you'd be fine for a couple of days."

"Thanks, maybe I'll do that. Not a bad view."

The deputy put out his hand. "I gotta run. You have my number."

"Thank you, Deputy McCain."

"Roger McCain, but hardly anyone remembers that. Folks tend to call me Mac."

"Nice meeting you, Mac. Thanks for helping out with this."

* * *

Sarah Dupre walked with Hamlet, her Great Dane, down the main street in Thunder Point to the diner. She looped his leash around the lamppost and went inside, pulling off her gloves. This was one of the things she loved about this little town—there was always somewhere to stop and chat for a few minutes. She wasn't well-known around here, had only lived here a few months, but considering the way she was treated by her new friends, it was as if she'd been here quite a while. If she wasn't working, she liked to take Ham down to the beach and stop off at the diner on her way home. Apparently she wasn't the only one—there was always a large bowl of water for dogs by the lamppost. Twin benches on either side of the diner's front door frequently seated one or two old guys, passing time.

Gina James was behind the counter of the diner. Gina took care of almost everything at the diner except the cooking. There was another waitress at night and a couple of part-time girls, but it was a pretty small shop. Gina's mother, Carrie, was sitting on a stool at the counter, her friend Lou McCair seated beside her. Carrie owned the deli across the street. Lou was a schoolteacher who helped out with her nephew Mac's kids when she wasn't teaching. Two of said kids were in a booth, eating fries and drinking colas, an after-school treat.

Sarah said, "Hey," and all three women said, "Hey," right back.

"Something to drink? Eat?" Gina asked her.

"Could I have a water, please? How is everyone?"

"What can I say, it's Friday," Lou said. "I won't be seeing the little bast—er, darlings till Monday morning."

Sarah laughed at her. "You're going to heaven for it."

"If I died and went to hell, they'd have me teaching junior high," Carrie said.

"And if I go to hell, I'll be making pies and cakes," Lou said.

"You have a day off?" Gina asked Sarah.

"For Landon's football game. I'm sitting alert Saturday and Sunday, that's the price I pay for it."

"But no one gives you any trouble about it, do they?"

"Nah. They like weekends off as much as anyone. And I'll gladly fly weekends if I don't have to miss Landon's games. It's not as though I have any other social life."

Carrie leaned her elbow on the diner. "Wish I had an exciting career like you, Sarah. Being a pilot beats my job, any day."

"Tell me about it," Lou said.

Before Gina could weigh in, the door to the diner opened, the bell tinkling. Ray Anne appeared in her version of a Realtor's business suit—too short, too tight, too much boobage. She scowled. "Sarah that dog should be on a leash!"

"He is, Ray Anne." She leaned back on her stool to look out the glass pane in the door. "He's all hooked up."

She wiped at her purple skirt. "He still managed to get me with that awful mouth of his."

"Well, Ray Anne, you're just so edible-looking," Lou said.

"Ha-ha. Well, you'll never guess what I just saw! The most gorgeous man, out at Ben's place. He was built like a brick you-know-what—worn jeans, torn in all the right places, plain old T-shirt under a leather jacket. One of those flying jackets, you know, Sarah. Driving one of those testosterone trucks, pulling a trailer... Handsome face, maybe a dimple, scratchy little growth on his cheeks and chin. He was talking to Mac. It was like an ad for Calvin Klein."

"What were you doing out at Ben's?" Lou asked.

"I was checking on a rental up the hill two blocks. You know, that old Maxwell place."

"Then how'd you see the tears in his jeans and his stubble?"

Ray Anne dipped a manicured hand into her oversize purse and pulled out her binoculars. She smiled conspiratorially and gave her head a toss. Her short blond hair didn't move.

"Clever," Lou said. "Man-watching taken to the next level. How old is this hunk of burning love?"

"Irrelevant," Ray Anne said. "I wonder what he's doing here. I heard Ben had no next of kin. You don't suppose cuddly old Ben was hiding a handsome brother? No, no, that would be cruel."

"Why?" Sarah asked.

"Because Ray Anne would love a shot at selling that property of Ben's," Carrie said.

"That's not true," Ray Anne protested. "You know me, I only want to help if I can."

“And bag a single man or two while you’re at it,” Lou said.

Ray Anne stiffened slightly. “Some of us are still sexual beings, Louise,” she said. “A notion you might not be familiar with.” As the Sheriff’s Department patrol car passed slowly down the street, Ray Anne said, “Oh, there’s Deputy Yummy Pants—I’m going to go ask him what’s going on. If I can get past the dog!”

Out the door she wiggled.

“Deputy *Yummy Pants*?” Sarah asked with a laugh in her voice.

“The teenage girls around town call him that,” Lou explained drily. “I don’t recommend it. He hates it. Gets him all pissy. I should tell you what kind of pants Ms. Realtor of the Year has. Maybe Busy Pants.”

Carrie’s lips quirked. “She suggested you don’t quite get the whole sexual pull. *Louise*.”

Lou had a sarcastic twist to her lips when she said, “If she turns up dead, can I count on you girls for an alibi?” Then she turned and called to her niece and nephew. “Hey, kids. Let’s make tracks.” To her friends she said, “I’m going to beat Yummy Pants home. Betcha I get more out of him than Busy Pants does.”

* * *

Sarah hung her red slicker on the peg in the mudroom just in time to see her younger brother, Landon, coming toward the back door of their house with his duffel full of football gear. “Hey,” she said. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I came home to get a couple of things and grab a sandwich,” he said. He bent to pet the dog. He didn’t have to bend far—Ham was tall. “Gotta get going.”

“Wait a sec,” she said.

“What?” he asked, still petting the dog.

“For Pete’s sake, can you *look* at me?” she asked. When he straightened, heavy duffel over one shoulder, she gasped. There was a bruise on his cheekbone.

“Practice,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

“You don’t practice on game day.”

“Yeah, well, I hope I don’t get in trouble for that. A couple of us went out to run some plays, some passes, and I got nailed. It was an accident.”

“You were practicing without a helmet?” she asked.

“Sarah, it’s nothing. It’s a small bruise. I could’ve gotten it running into an open locker. Lighten up so you don’t make me look like a girl. Are you coming to the game?”

“Of course I’m coming. Why couldn’t you be into chess or something? Choir? Band? Something that didn’t involve bodies crashing into each other?”

He grinned at her, the handsome smile that had once belonged to their deceased father. “You get enough sleep without me boring you to death,” he said. “Why couldn’t you just be a flight attendant or something?”

He had her there. Sarah flew search and rescue with the Coast Guard. There were those occasions that were risky. Edgy. And admittedly, that was part of what she loved best about it. “I trust you’ll be wearing your helmet tonight?”

“Funny. It should be a good game. Raiders are a good match. They’re a good team.”

“Does it hurt?” she asked, touching her own cheek.

“Nah, it’s really nothing, Sarah. See you later.”

She suppressed the urge to beg him to be careful. It was just the two of them; she was his guardian and family. She sometimes wanted to simply enfold him in her arms and keep him safe. Yet watching him play was thrilling. He was a great athlete, already six feet tall and muscled at sixteen. She'd heard he was the best quarterback they'd seen in a long time here in Thunder Point.

For the millionth time she hoped bringing him here had been a good decision. He'd been happy in the North Bend high school last year. He'd barely found his footing, his friends, when she'd moved them here. But she couldn't bear to stay in the same town as her ex, in the home they had shared. It was bad enough that they still worked together.

She'd moved them so often....

She reached out as if to hug him, then retracted her arms. He didn't want mush, not now that he was a man. So she held back.

"All right," he said patiently. "Get it over with."

She wrapped her arms around him and he gave her a one-armed hug back. Then he grinned at her again. He had absolutely no idea how handsome he was, which made him even more attractive.

"Play your little heart out, bud," she said. "And do not get hurt."

"Don't worry. I'm fast."

"You going out after the game?" she asked.

"I dunno. Depends on how tired I am."

Sarah looked at him. "When I was your age, I was never too tired to go out. If you go out, getting home by midnight would be nice. No later than one, for sure. Are we on the same page here?"

He laughed at her. "Same page, boss."

But as she knew, he seldom went out after a game.

Two

Roger McCain headed home for the day. He lived in a large house he couldn't quite afford with three kids and his aunt Lou. He was thirty-six and his oldest, Eve, was sixteen. Ryan was twelve, and Dee Dee was ten. When he got home, his first stop was the gun safe in the garage. He locked up his guns before going into the house. Though his kids had been both lectured and trained, guns did not enter his house.

It was about five-thirty when he walked into the kitchen from the garage. Lou stood at the sink, rinsing dishes. Lou was not Aunt Bee to his Andy of Mayberry. She was sixty, but didn't look a day over it. She wore fitted jeans, a white silky blouse, leather vest and boots on her young, trim body. Her curly, shoulder-length hair was auburn with some gold highlights and her nails were manicured in bright colors. She complained of crow's feet and what she called a wattle under her chin, but he didn't know what she was talking about. Lou called herself his old-maid aunt—she'd never married or had children of her own—but in truth she was young, energetic and feisty, exactly what he needed, even if it did drive him crazy at times.

Without even turning around she said, "There are tacos. The kids have eaten. Eve is going to take the van to the game tonight. She's meeting a couple of her friends. That leaves you and me and the kids to go together. In less than an hour."

Friday night. High school football. Eve was a cheerleader. A gorgeous, young cheerleader who resembled her mother and caused him to quake in fear every time he looked at her.

"Did it occur to you to ask me if I was all right with that—Eve taking the van?"

She turned from the sink. "It did," she said, giving him a sharp nod. "It always occurs to me. But you say no and argue and then give in so you can pace and grumble. She's sixteen and a good girl. She's earned it."

He nodded, but he hated it. His ex-wife Cee Jay—short for Cecilia Jayne—had been a cheerleader; he'd been a football player back in Coquille. Cee Jay had gotten pregnant at sixteen. By nineteen, he'd been a brand-new husband with a baby on the way.

Cee Jay left when Dee Dee was nine months old; that's when they had moved in with Lou. Cee Jay had been so young when she left—only twenty-three. Mac wasn't sure why he'd felt so old, as he'd been only twenty-six. But he'd been pretty busy, trying to support his family on two jobs. He was a rookie deputy, working nights, and by day he worked security on an armored car.

His dirty little secret was that sometimes he didn't mind the two jobs. But Cee Jay, left alone too much, scrimping to get by and buried in small children, complained a lot. There wasn't enough money, the house was small, old and falling apart, the kids were out of control, there was no fun in his life and very little attention from her husband, whom she accused of showing up only long enough to throw food down his throat and take off for the next job. She needed more money but hated that he was always working.

And then one day Cee Jay snapped. She packed a big suitcase, put the kids at the neighbor's house and waited for him to get home from his day job. "I can't take it anymore," she told him. "I'm sick of getting puked on, sick of the diapers and noise, sick of this dump we live in, tired of not being able to

get out of the grocery store with ten cents left in my purse. I've had enough. I'm leaving."

For the past nine years, he had asked himself why he'd been stunned. Her complaints hadn't changed, they'd just been accompanied by a suitcase. "L-leaving?" he had stuttered.

"The kids are next door," she said. "I'm taking my clothes and two hundred dollars."

His entire body had vibrated with fear. Dread. Pain. "Cee Jay, you can't do this to me."

"Yeah, well, you did it to me first. I was sixteen, Mac. Sixteen and pregnant!"

"But you were happy! And you wanted Ryan—you argued for Ryan! Dee Dee was an accident, but you—"

"And you thought that I had a clue, at sixteen or twenty-two?"

"Listen, I was only nineteen! So—we were too young, you think I don't know that? You can't just leave your children!"

"I have no way to support them and I can't take this anymore!"

"Cee Jay, how'm I supposed to work and take care of the kids?"

He remembered the sound of a horn honking. She zipped her bag. "I don't know, but you'll figure it out. Call your aunt—she always hated me anyway."

He had grabbed her by the shoulders and shaken her. It was the harshest hand he'd ever laid to a woman. "Are you *crazy*? What is this? Is that some guy picking you up?"

When he stopped shaking her, she said, "There's no guy! That's a cab! You want me to call the cops? Let go of me!"

Of course there was a guy. It took him all of three weeks to figure it out—some pro golfer. At first the mystery was how she had found the time to have enough of a relationship with him to talk him into taking her away. But he caught on—girlfriends. Young mothers like Cee Jay, running around, swapping kids, stealing time for themselves. Once Mac learned his name and began following his movements through the news, the second mystery followed: why she didn't come home to her family once the relationship was over, which took only a month or so.

He fantasized how he wouldn't make her beg much, just enough to be sure she had had a change of heart and was ready to commit, ready to promise never to do it again. No one could ever know the depth of humiliation at not being able to hang on to the mother of your children. At the time he had lived in Coquille, and it took roughly forty-eight hours for everyone who'd ever heard of him to be talking about how Cee Jay McCain left her young husband and three small children to run off with a golf pro. He spent the next five years nurturing a fantasy that she'd eventually come to her senses and be back, if only to see her children. Then it finally dawned on him to be afraid of that very scenario—that once he'd figured out how to manage, she'd stalk back in and stake some kind of claim. So he got himself a divorce. He had to locate her to do that—she turned up in Los Angeles. They didn't communicate. She signed the papers, relinquished custody and he let go except for a couple of tiny threads. He hated her for what she'd done to their children. And he was terrified of ever getting involved with a woman again.

It was with the divorce that they moved to the outskirts of Thunder Point, about thirty minutes east to Coquille, the sheriff's office. Even if Mac had to go back to the central office, he could commute. It was here, in a down economy, that he managed to find a larger home, one big enough for his family—three kids, Aunt Lou and two Labs.

Since Mac had lost his parents young and had lived with Lou during junior high and high school, you'd think she'd be as terrified as he was that Eve would slip and fall into some horny football player's lap and end up with the mess of a life her mother had. They had never talked about it; it had never been voiced. But they both knew what was eating Mac. He wanted Eve to be twenty-seven,

settled and safe. Real. Fast.

And just then his daughter dashed through the kitchen, wearing her barely there cheerleading uniform. Short, pleated skirt, V-neck sweater, letter jacket, long, beautiful legs, and a head full of thick dark hair she wore down most of the time. She had the biggest blue eyes. Her smile was positively hypnotizing; he'd barely paid off the orthodontist's bill, just in time to start on the next two mouths. Blue eyes ran in their genes but not perfect teeth. If not for the dental benefits offered by the Sheriff's Department, his kids would have teeth growing out of their ears.

"I'll wave to you at the game, Daddy," she said, rising on her toes to kiss his cheek. "We're going out after," she said.

"Midnight, Eve," he reminded her. As if she couldn't get into trouble before midnight. It wasn't that. It was just that it was all he could take. He needed his kids home and tucked in so he could relax.

"How often have I been late?"

"A few times," he said.

"Well, not very late," she reminded him. Then she beamed. "I think we're going to kick some Raider tail tonight!"

And he grinned at her. She was his doll; he'd die for her, it was that simple.

When she was out the door, Lou was shaking her head. "I wish you'd get a life," she said.

"This is my life," he said, and sat at the table, commencing to build himself some tacos.

"You need a little more going on. Like a woman."

"Why? You have somewhere to go?"

"I just might," she challenged.

"Well, knock yourself out," he said. "I can manage."

She laughed at him. "I'd love to see that," she said. She pulled a cold cola out of the fridge for him and sat at the table with him. "Tell me about the crime in Thunder Point, Mac. I haven't heard anything interesting all day."

"Well now," he said, sprinkling cheese on top of four large tacos. "No interesting crime, but an old friend of Ben Bailey's came to town, wanting to know what happened to him. He's sitting in his fifth wheel out at the bar. Says he's going to hang around a few days."

"Ray Anne mentioned something about that. She's not one to miss a new man in town." Lou clucked and shook her head. "Still can't believe Ben's gone."

"No one can believe it," Mac said. Then he dove into his first taco.

* * *

Cooper moved his trailer around to the far side of Ben's bar on the parking tarmac, pretty much out of sight of the road to 101. The small parking lot could only accommodate twenty or thirty cars, but he discovered a road toward the front of the structure that led to the beach. More of a downhill driveway really. The road to the beach looked much kinder than that trip up Bailey Pass and Gibbons to the highway.

He roamed around the locked-up property, peeking in windows. The newest and nicest part of the whole structure was an impressive deck, complete with tables and chairs surrounding the two sides of the building with a view. But a look through the windows revealed what he considered a dump. There was a long bar lined with stools, liquor bottles on the shelf, but only a half-dozen small tables. Life preservers, nets, shells and other seaside paraphernalia hung from the walls. A few turning racks of postcards and souvenirs sat about. The place looked like it hadn't been improved in years. He could

see the dust and grime from the window. This came as no surprise. Ben had been kind and generous to a fault, good with engines and just about anything mechanical, but he wasn't exactly enterprising. He could be a little on the lazy side, unless he had an engine maintenance job to do. And he hadn't been too good with money; he spent what he had. When Cooper first met him, he was living a cash existence, just like his father had. He sure hadn't been classy. *Cheap Drinks*. Just a kindhearted good old boy.

Cooper unloaded the WaveRunner, his all-terrain vehicle—the Rhino—and his motorcycle. There was a large metal shed at the end of the parking lot, up against the hill, but it was padlocked. He stored his toys under a tarp, locked up in chains so they couldn't be stolen without a blowtorch and trailer.

He wandered down to the beach to the dock. There was a fueling tank perched on the end and a paved boat launch. He wondered if Ben had a boat in the shed, which was as big as a garage. The sun was lowering and it was getting damn cold on the water, unlike the Southern climate he'd come from. He encountered a few people out walking or jogging and gave a nod. He was glad he carried a Glock on his back waistband, under his jacket. After all, he was alone out here, no one knew him, and he still had reservations about Ben falling down the stairs. Big man like Ben, you'd think he'd have survived even a steep fall with only some bruises. Worst case, a broken bone.

With night beginning to fall, he headed back to the toy hauler. He'd have time to explore Thunder Point tomorrow. He figured he'd relax, get a good night's sleep and get to know the men and women who'd been Ben's friends in the morning.

But at around eleven, he heard the noise of people talking. He put on his jacket, gun tucked in his waistband, and went outside. He brought the binoculars from the truck, wandered around the deck. The waterfront had come alive. He saw kids on the beach, partying around a couple of campfires. From the shouts and squeals, they were teenagers. A set of headlights from clear on the other side of the beach near the town brought it all together. Ben's place was probably most often accessed from the beach side, especially at night. Sure enough, the headlights he saw pulled right up on the sand, next to a row of all-terrain vehicles—Rhinos, quads, dune buggies.

Yep, this was a beach bar. Complete with Laundromat, bait and gas for boats. It all made sense now—in winter and bad weather, Ben likely had moderate sales, but in summers he probably did a brisk business. Folks from Thunder Point, on the other side of the beach, stopping for a soda or morning coffee when they were out walking their dogs; people from the town driving over in beach buggies to have a drink on the deck at sunset. Sport fishermen or sailors could start or end their days here.

Cooper was a little bit sorry he wasn't going to be around to watch the summer storms roll in over the Pacific. Or the whales migrating in spring and fall. Whales wouldn't be in the bay, but he was willing to bet the view was great from either the far edge of the cliff or the point on the opposite side of the bay.

This would have appealed to Ben for a million reasons. It was his father's and he'd spent years here. The view was fantastic, and no one liked to put his feet up and relax more than Ben Bailey.

There was some loud popping and shrieking on the beach and he automatically reached for that Glock, but it was followed by laughter. Firecrackers. Then there was some chanting. *Go, Cougars, Go, Go, Cougars, Go. Go, Go, Get 'Em, Get 'Em, Go, Get 'Em, Go!*

Cheers. That's what was going on. It was October. Football and teenagers. This was what coastal kids did after a game and probably all summer long. Coop had spent many of his early years on the Gulf, but by the time he was a teenager his parents had moved inland, away from the water to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Cooper and his friends often went out to the remote desert, away from the prying eyes of adults where they could build a fire, drink a few beers, make out with their girlfriends

What a perfect setup. There was a whole coastline all the way to Canada, but this little piece of it didn't have easy access. You either came at it by way of Ben's or from the town, on foot or armed with a beach mobile. There wouldn't be many strangers around.

He went back to his camper and settled in—door locked, gun handy. He let the TV drown out the noise from the kids until it faded away. In the morning he brewed coffee and took a cup with him to the dock, then the beach. Although he had no investment in this place, he found himself hoping they had cleaned up after themselves and hadn't left trash all over the beach.

And what do you know? There were a couple of big green trash cans with lids up against the hill, full of bottles, cans, snack wrappers, spent firecrackers. The tide had taken out the remnants of a fire. Except for being raked, the beach was cleaned up. Who were these kids? The Stepford teenagers?

He took a deep breath of foggy sea air and decided he'd shower and hit the town. He'd like to know a little more about this place.

* * *

Cooper thought about taking the Rhino across the beach to the town, but instead he took the truck back up to 101, just to check out the distance. The freeway curved east, to the right, away from the town, and it was five miles before he saw a small sign for Thunder Point. Then it was a left turn and another five miles to access the town. He was about a mile, maybe mile and a half across the beach, or ten miles on the road.

Heading into Thunder Point from 101, he passed the high school—circa 1960s—on the edge of town. Not too big, he noted. Then he came to the main street, Indigo Sea Drive.

He had passed through a hundred towns like this, maybe a thousand. There wasn't a lot of commerce—dry cleaner, bakery, diner. There was a very small library at the end of the street. Next to it, the elementary and middle schools sat side by side. He spotted a secondhand clothing store right next to a thrift shop and wondered what the difference was. There was a grocery, liquor store, pharmacy, gas station, hardware store and small motel. There was a dingy-looking bar, Waylan's. And yes, Fresh Fish. There was also McDonald's, Taco Bell, Subway and Carrie's Deli and Catering. The Sheriff's Department was a small storefront that sat between the deli and a boarded-up store, although a man was tearing the boards off one large window. New business moving in? Cooper wondered.

Driving around, he discovered four roads that ran downhill to the beach or marina, through the neighborhoods that surrounded the main street. The beach and the bay were like a basin dug out of the land. All roads seemed to lead either up or down—down to the marina, up to the main street, down to the beach, up to Bailey's.

It appeared the main street and marina were the life of the town. Most of the slips were empty—fishing boats, out early in the morning, he assumed. He saw two boat-launch ramps and a fueling station. There were a number of small fishing and pleasure boats still tied up and one big cabin cruiser. There was a restaurant—Cliffhanger's, which also advertised a bar—at the far end of the marina, far enough up the hill to avoid high tides and flooding.

He went back to the main street and drove west, out onto the point. There were houses out there, as well. On the end of the promontory was a very large home with a gated driveway. Whoever owned the house got the best view imaginable, as the point was a high, rocky cliff. From Ben's deck he had noticed a small lighthouse, somewhere below this mansion.

It wasn't exactly a cute little town, but there were some nice touches, like big pots of flowers in front of some businesses, old-fashioned lampposts, benches here and there along wide sidewalks.

He reasoned the best places to perch for local news would be one of the bars or the local diner. Cliffhanger's wasn't open yet. Waylan's probably was, but he wasn't in the mood for a seedy bar. He went to the diner and sat at the counter. It was either designed to be retro or it was fifty years old. By the cracks in the linoleum floor, he guessed it was all about age. The waitress was there in a flash, with a coffeepot in her hand. Her blond hair was in a ponytail and she wore a black-and-white-checked blouse. Her name tag said Gina.

"Good morning, Gina," he said.

She filled his cup. "And good morning, strange man. Hungry?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. What have you got for eggs?" Cooper asked.

She put down the coffeepot and leaned both hands on the counter. With a wide smile, she said, "It's the darnedest thing, we have eggs for eggs."

He couldn't suppress a grin. "Mess up a couple for me. Toast, too, and...you have sausage for sausage?"

"Link or patty?"

"Patty," he said.

"Whole wheat or whole wheat?"

"Why don't I live recklessly? Whole wheat."

"Good choice. It's better for you. Now drink that coffee slow so I don't have to keep coming back here."

"Could I have some ice water?" He looked around. The small diner was empty of customers. "If it's not too much trouble?"

"It's extra," she said. She turned and slapped the ticket on the cook's counter.

"I can afford it," he said. "But it might cut into your tip."

She fixed up an ice water and placed it before him. "If it's going to cut into my tip, I won't charge you for it. You think I work here for the wages?" She gave the counter a wipe. "I know you're not just passing through—there's only two ways into this town, and both are inconvenient."

"Two ways?" he asked, confident she was going to tell him about Gibbons to Bailey's, down the hill, or Indigo Sea Drive, right through the heart of town.

"By land or by sea," she said. "We are en route to nowhere."

"I am, though. Passing through. Ben Bailey was a friend of mine and I just heard—"

She got a stricken look on her face. "Oh, I'm sorry! Man, we miss Ben around here."

"That's why I'm hanging around—to meet some of his friends. Ben and I met in the Army, a long time ago. We stayed in touch, but I've never been up here before."

"Ben was such a nice guy—the last person I could imagine losing."

"Who were his closest friends?" Cooper asked.

"Oh, hell, no one and everyone," she said with a shrug. "Ben kind of watched over the whole town, but I don't know of any one or two people he was best friends with."

The door opened and Mac came in. He wasn't in uniform this morning and looked just as comfortable in jeans, boots, plaid shirt and jacket.

"This is the guy you should probably ask," Gina said. "Hey, Mac."

He pulled off his cap and sat next to Cooper at the counter. "Ask me what?"

"This guy was a friend of Ben's—"

"We've met," Mac said, sticking out a hand. "How's it going, Mr. Cooper?"

Cooper laughed. "Every time you call me Mr. Cooper, I wonder if my father just entered the room. My name's actually Hank, short for Henry, but people call me Cooper."

“Is that a military thing? Last name?”

“It started way before the Army. I’m a junior—~~Henry Davidson Cooper, Junior~~. My dad goes by Hank, but no one went for Henry or little Hank so I got saddled with Little Cooper until I wasn’t so little, then just Cooper. Sometimes Coop. Take your pick. It’s going all right. That beach can get busy at night.”

“Kids,” Mac confirmed. “They behave?”

“Not only did they behave, they cleaned up.”

“Yeah, you can give Ben credit for that. That whole stretch of beach right up to the town and marina is...was his. He let it go public. He’d walk down there from time to time when it was real active, a bunch of kids, and inform them in his way that the minute he had to clean up the beach after campers or partiers, he’d have a fence erected and close it. He put out trash cans and once a week or so he’d check to see if they needed emptying. He had rules for his beach.”

“He policed the beach?” Cooper asked.

“Yeah, but it was more about the wildlife than saving him work. He didn’t want things like plastic bags or rings from six-packs left in the sand or washing out with the tide, killing fish or getting picked up by a bird and causing harm, like strangling it. Or choking it. About once a year he’d post a couple of Private Property signs, kind of a warning or a reminder. Word spread about his place, his beach. He had regular motorcycle or cycling groups come through in summer, he called them his weekend warriors. He had a real scary-looking gang camping on the beach once but he confronted them, told them it was his property and they were welcome to use it if there were no firearms, no underage drinking, no drugs, didn’t give the town any trouble and if they threw away their trash so it wouldn’t harm wildlife.” Mac shook his head as he laughed. “He never bothered to call in reinforcements—I heard about the riders the next day, but Ben never called me. The riders kept it cool, threw away their trash and thanked him for the use of his beach. He had a way about him, you know? That incident was a long time ago and according to Ben and folks in town, in the end they were a docile bunch. Ben’s place usually attracted more graybeards, out for the weekend.”

“Graybeards?”

“Older riders—minimum age fifty or so. Ben was a pretty easygoing guy and nothing scared him. He always got along with anyone.”

“I know,” Cooper said.

Gina put Cooper’s breakfast in front of him and refilled his coffee cup.

“Good call on the eggs,” Mac said. “You tell him?” he asked Gina.

“Nope. It was his first choice.”

“Burgers here are great,” Mac said. “Sandwiches are pretty good, soup has good days, meat loaf is terrible—don’t know why Stu keeps making it, no one in this town is fool enough to eat it. It’s god-awful. He just fries the hell out of eggs, so either get ’em scrambled, over hard, omelet or hard-boiled. In fact, anything he can just fry to death or broil is pretty good.”

“Why doesn’t the owner get a better cook?”

“The owner *is* the cook, that’s the primary reason,” Gina said. Then, looking at Mac, she asked, “Everyone get to where they’re going?”

“Eve and Ashley are at cheerleading practice, Ryan’s at football and Lou took Dee Dee to dance. Just so you know, Eve and Ashley went in your mother’s car.”

Gina nodded but had a grave look on her face.

“You two...?” Cooper started to ask.

“Single parents,” Gina said. “Our daughters are best friends. Most of the time.”

“So you back each other up?” Cooper asked, shoveling some eggs in his mouth.

“Lotta back up,” Mac explained. “My aunt lives with me, Gina’s mother lives with her. It takes a village...where have I heard that before. You married, Cooper?”

“Nah. No one would have me.”

“Maybe it’s because you live out of a toy hauler, ever think of that?” Mac asked.

Cooper grinned. “Could be. Well, now that I have the lay of the land, I can get eggs and coffee a lot easier. Straight across the beach in the Rhino. Except, I think I got what I came for—I wanted to know what the hell happened to Ben. Have I heard everything I’m going to hear?”

“The coroner ruled on it, but I’m keeping my eyes open. It’s not an open case, but this is my town and Ben was a good guy. If I hear anything suspicious, I’ll be investigating myself,” Mac said.

“What about this Rawley Goode?” Cooper asked.

“Weird Rawley?” Gina asked with a curl of her lip.

“Aw, Rawley’s got his troubles,” Mac said. “I just hope he doesn’t wander off, now that Ben’s gone and the place is closed.”

“I was kind of hoping he would wander off,” Gina said.

“You have a problem with Rawley?” Cooper asked.

“I have a problem with the way he looks you in the eye like he can see straight through you and say ab-so-lutely nothing. It’s creepy.”

Mac chuckled. “That’s pretty much why Ben gave him a dishrag and a broom and some kitchen chores. They seemed to understand each other.”

“This place—everyone works together, understands each other, cleans up after each other, a regular Stepford...”

“We have as many idiots, assholes and troublemakers as any town, but you know what the difference is between this town and any other town?”

Cooper leaned his head on his hand. “I can’t wait. What’s the difference?”

Mac pushed his coffee cup toward Gina for a refill. “I know who they are.”

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