

SPRING TIDE

by

Robbi McCoy

CHAPTER ONE

A squat wooden building sat at the north edge of town just across the street from the marina. A hand-painted sign at the edge of the road read, simply, Bait Shop. Another sign above the door read Rudy's Bait and Tackle. A multitude of smaller signs announced items in the store's inventory: *Minnows, Nightcrawlers, Cold Beer, Ice, Live Crawdads, Fishing Licenses, Ghost Shrimp, Fresh Shad* and *Ida's World-Famous Beef Jerky*. In front of the shop on one side of the door was an ice locker. On the other side was a Pepsi machine. On the far side of that was an old turquoise and beige vinyl car seat bolted to the cement porch like a park bench. A stack of plastic buckets stood upside down beside the ice locker, and a row of colorful T-shirts hung from the eaves of the building. A neon orange OPEN sign glowed in the front window.

Stef had never been in a bait shop. Unlike a dozen other sports, fishing was unknown to her. She flinched at the idea of nightcrawlers and beef jerky in the same store, assuming, but not entirely sure, that the worms were for the fish and the jerky was for the humans.

She pulled her motorcycle into a parking space in front of the store and took a better look while she removed her helmet and gloves. The place was a relic, an unpretentious, cluttered,

saggy, all-purpose bait shop that had obviously been here for a long time and, she guessed, hadn't changed much in all that time. Like the restaurant a half a mile away on Main Street, the Sunflower Café, unchanged in the last fifty years, she had been told, except for the occasional coat of vivid yellow paint. And the three-story brick Stillwater Bay Hotel, an even older business and the only hotel in this lazy river town.

Stillwater Bay was perched on a natural inlet of the wide, meandering Sacramento River. Stef had been in the area just over one week, but that was long enough to have seen every inch of the town. It was a short row of businesses on either side of a two-lane highway bisecting farmland—pear and cherry orchards, grazing cows, horses and sheep, fields of corn, tomatoes and melons, none of it ripe yet, but vibrant with fresh spring growth. On the country roads nearby were scattered homes, most of them sitting on a few or more acres, a metal mailbox on a wooden post sometimes the only clue somebody lived at the end of a dirt road. The area was peaceful, sparsely populated, shaded by gnarly oaks and soaring eucalyptus. It was hard to believe they were only seventy miles from the metropolitan centers of California's Bay Area where she had lived most of her life. Her turf was Hayward and Oakland, the East Bay, solidly urban and often troubled.

This town was unpretentious. It was a town people lived in. It wasn't like the quaint towns in the Sierra foothills that had turned themselves into weekend tourist traps. People didn't come here to shop in art galleries or stay at bed and breakfasts or sip wine or dine on the latest fad foods. People didn't seem to come here at all.

But in another few weeks, she'd learned, the town would be bursting at the seams with thousands. Every year, for one weekend in June, Stillwater Bay hosted its annual Crawdad Festival. There were banners across Main Street and posters in the windows of all the shops, including Rudy's bait shop. The town's claim to fame, it seemed, had something to do with

crayfish, locally known as “crawdads.” As you drove into town, a huge red crustacean greeted you on the side of the lone hotel. The Sunflower Cafe had a prominent sign in the window that said, *Crawdads Served Here*.

Stef knew nothing about crawdads, but in the images she’d seen they looked like lobsters, which, she reasoned, couldn’t be all bad.

She walked up three stairs to the cluttered wooden porch. The front door was propped open with a wedge of wood. Inside, the space was dim. The aisles between the few rows of merchandise were narrow. The amount of stuff crammed into the limited space was impressive. On one side of the shop was a checkout counter with nobody behind it. Vintage signs like Coca-Cola, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Winchester Fishing Tackle, and a myriad of old metal “Gone Fishing” signs were plastered on the wall above the counter.

The store was overwhelming at first. She stood in the doorway for a moment to take some of it in: snacks, drinks, hats, vests, fishing poles, nets, sun screen, tackle boxes, ice chests, everything you’d need for a day out fishing. There were also mysterious things like jars of bright pink balls of different sizes called Salmon Eggs, including one called Balls O’ Fire with the slogan, “Soft but Satisfying.”

At the front of the store, under the window, stood a five-foot wide aquarium full of small lobster-like creatures, greenish and ruddy brown with long claws, antennae and fanned tails. Crawdads, she guessed. She took a closer look at the critters before turning her attention to the two men in the store, an old man with a bushy white beard and a middle-aged man with a squarish head and thick, steel-gray hair. The latter was shorter than Stef, about five-six with one eye open a little wider than the other, both of them half hidden under unruly black eyebrows. In his hand was a Styrofoam carton. He was arguing with the older man, who wore a yellow short-sleeved T-shirt under dark blue coveralls, hanging loosely on his legs but stretched tightly across

his rounded stomach.

Based on the conversation between them, she guessed the shorter one was the owner of the store. Her suspicion became fact when the old man called him “Rudy.” As soon as she’d seen the name on the sign out front, she’d started an automatic process of classification. Rudy, Rudolf, Rudolpho... German, Italian, Portuguese. It was a byproduct of her training that she attempted to pigeonhole everybody by the slightest bit of information. Rudy could have been of Italian descent with his dark eyes and swarthy complexion, but his speech was pure American.

“If you don’t want these,” he told the old man, “then go with blood worms. Always reliable for cats.”

“I don’t want worms,” the old man countered in a grainy voice. “Best bait I ever used was chicken livers. Caught a lot of fish on chicken livers. Last month I hooked a monster on a chicken liver. He was so big he snapped my fifteen pound test line clean off.”

“You sure you didn’t land an old tire?” Rudy chuckled.

“It was a channel cat,” the old man insisted. “He was churning up water like a paddle wheeler. That’s what you get with chicken livers.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Rudy grumbled. “Chicken livers are your favorite. Been that way for sixty years.”

“Turkey livers are even better, but ain’t no place that sells ’em around here.”

“Then go with the chicken livers,” Rudy concluded, waving the carton under the old man’s nose. Then he nodded at Stef to let her know he had seen her come in.

“I would, but you’re charging three times what they cost in the supermarket. I can get a pint of chicken livers for a dollar fifty at Centro-Mart.”

“That’s because these chicken livers are all ready to go.” He shook the carton again at the old man. “We’ve done all the work already. They’re wrapped in mesh and tied off, cut just the

right size for your monster cat. Just put them on the hook.”

“I can cut and tie ’em myself and save three dollars if I buy ’em at Centro-Mart,” the old man argued.

“Then buy the damned things at Centro-Mart!”

“I would, but that means going to Stockton, which is gonna take me an hour and three gallons of gas round trip and end up costing a whole lot more. And you know I don’t like driving into the city. Why don’t you sell ’em both ways instead of trying to rip off senior citizens on a fixed income? Used to be you could buy just plain chicken livers in here.”

“People want convenience,” Rudy said.

“People are wasteful. Next time you get a batch, just put some aside for me and don’t mess with ’em. And while you’re at it, why don’t you sell turkey livers?”

Stef went through an arched doorway to another room containing at least a dozen large fish tanks. She peered at a school of silvery minnows swimming in unison across the front of one tank. Another had dozens of pale shrimp climbing all over one another.

“I got a solution for you,” Rudy announced. “When Thanksgiving comes around and turkeys are going for ten cents a pound, buy yourself a truckload of them, take out all the livers and freeze them. You’ll be set for the year. Then roast up all the turkeys and invite the whole town over for Thanksgiving.”

“You’re an ornery cuss, you know that, Rudy?”

Rudy shoved the carton of chicken livers at the old man. “Here. Consider that your birthday present. I’ll hold some back whole for you next time. Now get outta here, Dad. I’ve got a real customer.”

The old man grunted and left the store.

“Need some bait?” Rudy asked, walking up to Stef. “I just hope you’re not looking for

turkey livers, that's all I got to say."

She laughed. "No. That was your father?"

"Yeah. Rudy, Senior. He built this place. Retired now. And in all the years he ran this place, he never sold turkey livers." Rudy grinned and snorted good-naturedly, looking up at her through his turbulent eyebrows. "Now what can I get you?"

"I was told you had Fish and Game maps of the Delta."

"Yeah, sure. The whole Delta? Is that the one you want, or just this area?"

"The whole Delta, all the way to the San Francisco Bay."

He chuckled, then led her back to the front of the store where he slipped behind the counter. On one end of it was a big plastic jar labeled Ida's World-Famous Beef Jerky. Stef opened the jar and took a piece out.

Rudy put a map on the counter. "That's the one. Shows every river and all the feeders, all the navigable sloughs and cuts, location of gas pumps, pumpout stations, marinas, stores, everything you wanna know." He opened the map and spread it out between them. "Here we are right here." He pointed to the town of Stillwater Bay, situated in the middle of dozens of snaking blue lines. "Head west from here on the Sacramento River. On to Suisun Bay, then you sail right into San Francisco Bay. That's the direct route. You'll be there tomorrow."

Stef ripped off a bite of the jerky with her teeth. It was moist, tangy and peppery.

"Or you can wind your way through all these little channels," Rudy said, tracing small blue waterways with his index finger, "find some hidden fishing holes, and maybe make it to the Bay in five years."

She nodded appreciatively. "How much?"

"Six dollars. And a dollar for the jerky."

"This is good. I'll take another." She handed him the money and helped herself to another

strip of jerky.

“I’ll tell Ida you said so.”

“Ida’s local?”

“Yep. She’s my wife. Makes that out of London broil. Nice and lean. The marinade, that’s a secret. She won’t even tell me what’s in it.”

Stef scanned the map, noting the vast network of waterways branching out from several rivers on their way to the Pacific Ocean, creating hundreds of islands amid the flowing tendrils. As Rudy suggested, a person could spend years exploring all those twists and turns.

“What kind of boat you got?” Rudy asked.

“Houseboat. Forty foot Crest Pontoon.”

“Crest Pontoon? What year?”

“Seventy-five.”

Rudy whistled. “A classic! Nice. So you’ll be exploring a bit. Doing any fishing?”

“I might,” said Stef uncertainly.

“What’ll you go for?”

“I don’t know. What do you suggest?”

His face lit up at the question. “Most folks go for either stripers or catfish. If you want a surefire thing, go for cats. You can catch a cat with a bare hook around here, but I recommend blood worms. Some people swear by chicken livers.” He laughed. “If you want an adventure, you can try for sturgeon.”

“Sturgeon?”

“Oh, there are some scary fish out there.” His wide eye grew even wider, then he stepped over to a wall of photos and pointed at one. “Look here. That’s Whitey Wilson with a three hundred pounder.”

Stef peered at the photo. A bow-legged old man stood beside a hanging fish that was bigger than he was. “He caught that out here?”

“Yep. Whitey’s passed on to a better place years ago now, but he used to buy his bait right here every Sunday morning. Caught that one with ghost shrimp. Nowadays, if they’re bigger than six feet, you gotta put ’em back. A fish like that might be two hundred years old.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope. Sturgeon are slow growers, but they live a long time. They come up here in spring to spawn, so that’s when you can catch them.”

All of the photos on the wall around Whitey Wilson and his sturgeon were of anglers with their catches. There were men, women and children, some of the children barely walking age, proudly displaying their fish. One little, dark-haired girl in a yellowed photo held a line with two fish hanging off two hooks. Must have been a memorable day for her, Stef mused, noting the girl’s huge grin.

“You need a fishing license?” Rudy asked.

“Not today. I’ll just take the map. Thanks for the advice.”

“Any time.” He folded the map and handed it to her.

She left the shop, emerging into the bright sunlight squinting. Her boat was a long way from exploring the sloughs and rivers of the Delta, but she wanted the map to remind her of what she was working toward. It would help her imagine her future, leisurely exploring the maze of waterways, listening to frogs croaking and geese honking, enjoying the solitude, so far, far away from the crazy streets of East Bay cities and the reminders of why she no longer had a life there.

If only she could quit having nightmares, she could really leave all of that behind.

She walked to her bike, looking across the street at the rows of pleasure boats rocking gently in their berths. Each slip contained somebody’s means of escape. Beyond the marina, the

wide, greenish gray river lay sparkling under the hot afternoon sun, its distant bank lined with slender tule stalks.

She glanced at the map in her hand, sucked in a deep breath and thought, *This is my salvation.*

(End of Preview)