

dark fantasy horror supernatural occult Indians Oceanside Oregon  
magic runes

**Red Tide**

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## *Prolog*

*Providence, RI. December 12, 1995.*

“I’m bloody sick of this place.” The speaker, a short woman with brown hair pushed back behind her ears, stared bleakly outside at the snow that eddied about on the frozen sidewalks and street below. Even in the courthouse she wore a light blue down jacket, though it was no longer zipped up. Her companion squeezed her shoulder in mute support and found herself following the other’s gaze outside. She said, her voice pitched low by habit rather than any furtiveness, “It’ll be over soon. You saw the way the judge looked. He’s not buying any of it.”

The first woman, Pam Whitby, glanced at her friend and nodded without commenting before she looked back outside.

The second woman, Debra McKinley, smiled sadly. Had not a drunk decided to drive rather than take a cab, Pam would be her sister-in-law, and the two of them would not have found themselves in a courthouse. Kevin, Deb’s older brother by two years, had left everything to Pam, which turned out to be considerable, much to everyone’s surprise. Kevin’s two remaining sisters and mother had hit the roof, not so much because of greed as because of an overwhelming dislike of Pam.

Pam didn’t think much of them either.

She looked back outside and stiffened. A figure now stood at the bus stop across the street and seemed to be staring up at her. Dressed in dark cloak that came down past the knees, Pam recognized only too well the face framed by the hood.

Debra had turned away and moved a few steps toward the courtroom when she felt a cold draft of air wash over her. She

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peered to her left into an alcove that she'd have sworn had been empty but a few seconds before. Startled, she caught her breath and froze for a moment.

Pam spun around and in three lightening steps, interposed herself between Debra and the figure that had been outside but a moment before. "What the hell do you want?"

The woman pushed the hood back and regarded Pam for a moment before she glanced at Debra. Her eyes were ebony and her hair onyx, framing a pale face whose smile hinted little warmth of character. "You have my sympathies, Pamela Whitby. Kevin was unique."

"Lovely. Now that you've shared that, Hecate, I'm sure you'll excuse us . . ."

The figure sighed and shook her head minutely. "I'm afraid not. There's the oath Kevin left unfulfilled."

"Let me guess. You want me to do it." Hecate nodded. "Forget it. I don't have Kevin's resources or abilities and you know it."

"Perhaps, but you have talents of which you are ignorant. And the need is great."

"That's a shame. However, you don't have any claim on me and right now, I've got business of my own to straighten out."

"The lawsuit will be concluded today. In your favor."

"Bully. I've still got a full schedule. Hit the bricks."

Hecate showed no reaction but locked eyes with Pam for several long heartbeats. Then slowly she shifted her glance to Debra. "I can't force you, as you know. Kevin taught you well. A blood token will have to do in that case."

Pam stiffened and moved between her friend and the dark woman. "Leave Deb out of it."

"Or . . ."

Pam clenched her teeth — she had no way of stopping Hecate and knew it. "She's done nothing to you; she doesn't

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know anything about Kevin's work." Behind her, Debra looked puzzled and started to speak but Pam shook her head and remained, a barrier between the two, her gaze locked with Hecate.

Hecate raised a hand and made a flicking motion and Pam found herself standing several feet to the left. Slowly, Hecate began to close her hand, drawing it back toward her body; Deb let out a low gasp and began to fade away into clear air.

She had no choice; Pam jumped toward Deb. "Stop! I'll do it — leave her out of it." She grabbed for Deb's arm only to find nothing she could grab.

Hecate stopped. She locked her gaze with Pam. "Do you assume the debt? Will you swear?"

Pam closed her eyes for a moment and then straightened up and opened them again, defeated. Formally, she answered in a low voice, "I so swear."

Hecate opened her hand again abruptly and nodded. "I dislike forcing you, but I have no choice. Know that Kevin would have honored his oath to me. Indeed, had he known of the situation, he would have taken it on, willingly, on his own. He was that kind of man."

Pam shrugged — might have, might have not. At this point it mattered very little. "I still have things I have to do."

"Then do them. You have time. I have many things to prepare before you can begin." Hecate smiled slightly, a cold impersonal look within which lurked subtle danger. She nodded once more to the two women and faded from view.

Neither spoke for a long time. Deb broke the silence finally. "What the hell just happened?"

Pam sighed and after a glance back out the window to the cold street below, turned to her. "Forget it. I'll handle it."

"Like hell I will. That woman came out of nowhere."

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Pam looked at her and realized Deb wouldn't let it go; she shared that weakness with her brother. Nor would Pam have let it slide. "It's a long story and complicated."

"Then you'd better get started."

Pam regarded her for several long, weary seconds and sighed. She led her to a dark mahogany bench up against an internal wall and sat down. "Well. It's like this. Kevin was a magician."

Debra McKinley looked at her for five seconds, her face expressionless. "Like David Copperfield? Right?"

Pam shook her head. "Well, not really. More like Merlin . . ."  
It was indeed a long and complicated story.



Outside, the snow began to fall with a vengeance, icy corn snow pellets that signaled a serious storm that would last days. Hecate wove a glamour about herself, shielding her from the scrutiny of any passersby. Gently she began to weave a spell that slowly erased the memory of her visit from Debra McKinley's mind. She held it in abeyance once prepared and began the more difficult task of manipulating Pam Whitby's memories. Some things she merely dimmed, made difficult to recall, while others she obliterated without a trace. Delicately she trimmed, fit, and smoothed away any trace of memory that could reveal that Pam Whitby had encountered Hecate that day. She then slowly released both spells in a seeping flow that no power, natural or supernatural, could discern. Like the slow melting of a glacier under the sun, her alterations continued until after the sun had set and the newborn night walked the city, cloaked in softly falling snow.

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Once finished, she again smiled coldly. It was again time to challenge the Maker, again time to renew the war between them that had lasted for more than a thousand years. Bound servants, trusted followers, talented adherents had all failed in the past. But a free agent, a person acting on their own, following no plan and certainly not under Hecate's control in the slightest — would that succeed?

Perhaps. Hecate faded back into the night of which she was Queen, and began to make the few material things Pam would need. They'd be placed where they would be found, but that was as far as Hecate could go. That would have to be enough. She could do no more without a serious risk to Pam.

The night held no answer. Nor would the coming day.  
Six months would pass before the struggle could begin.



Eric examined the situation and decided to cut his losses. It didn't take a genius to figure out that with six bottles of Ripple, two girls, and three boys, he was going to get stuck with the extra bottle and a so-sorry-Charlie, go away. Fifteen is such a screwed-up age to suffer through.

Carrie McDowell was sprawled in Scott's lap, working her way through to the far side of puberty, while Theo Ytturie tried to figure out how all the parts came undone on Michelle Young. Three empty bottles indicated the lubrication efforts to date and Eric had had enough. He picked up his nearly full bottle, looked down the neck and grimaced before rearing back and flinging it oceanwards. They could take this little beach party and shove it into whatever dark recesses happened to turn up handy.

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Eric got to his feet and headed for the trail that led to the bluff, pausing only momentarily at the foot to look back at the party, hard, brown eyes shaded from the nearly setting sun. "Sweet," he muttered. "Hope you guys just have one hell of a time." His gaze swept out over the surf rolling in on the sheltered sand of Lost Boy Beach and then he turned back to find the trail.

An odd, prickly feeling plucked at the crown of his head, like somebody with light fingers had goosed him with tiny electric charges. He could feel his hair start to stand up, just like that time in the Science Fair when they had him grab an electrode and started pumping static electricity into him. He froze. He felt eyes running up his back.

He snapped his head around.

Nothing. But now the hair on the back of his arms was at attention.

To hell with it! Eric Hasse started his climb at precisely 6:41 p.m. and by 7:03 p.m. he'd reached the Maxwell Point road at the top. When he looked down at the beach in the gathering darkness, he couldn't see anything at all, no sign of a beach fire, nothing. He didn't know how right he was.

The beach was empty, except for two full bottles of Ripple, three empties, and half of a 34B-cup bra. And about three liters of mixed O and B positive blood that was soon washed from the sand. Two weeks passed.

## *Ch. 1: Rip Tide*

*"The Soft Parade"*

*Can you give me sanctuary?  
I must find a place to hide,  
A place for me to hide.  
Can you find me soft asylum?  
I can't make it, anymore.  
The man is at the door.*

*Jim Morrison/The Doors*

Pam Whitby pulled to a stop and considered the narrow road ahead. Sand had drifted from the hillside to the west and covered the asphalt in front of her, leaving only a foot of the dark surface in sight, the skip stripe popping up every few feet. As she watched, gusts of wind skittered more tiny grains across the surface, flowing like a tide of blond mites toward a promised haven. She shook her head, brushed her light brown hair back behind her ears and wondered just how the road crews managed to keep the road open throughout the year. They must have a devil of a time.

She looked in the rearview mirror to make sure there was no traffic, opened the car door, got out and stood staring at the hill to her left, a small woman leaning on the top of the car door only a few inches below her chin. Green eyes surveyed the cut-bank, which was more a dune than a hill, with scruffy patches of saw grass straining to hold it in place — a vain attempt by the county highway department to stem the tide of sand as it swept

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ever eastward under the ocean-fed winds. The cut section blocked her view of the ocean but behind her a hundred feet, it disappeared for two hundred before a new cut section arose.

Pam closed the door and walked back a hundred feet past the dune, to look at the stretch of land to the west, a broad expanse of undulating sand. She recalled that she had seen a name on the map, Sand Lake. She wondered if this might be it.

She decided that it couldn't be anything else. She could make out the Pacific in the distance, about a mile away. Between the dark gray, frothy ocean and her; a copse of gnarled coast pines extended north and south, marking the edge of a large sandy basin. Here and there she could see little patches of blasted, stunted trees and brush still resisting the encroaching sand. They looked doomed and probably were. The sand dunes below her were in a frozen, twisted undulation

Opposite Pam, a gully ran parallel to the roadway and dove down twenty feet, revealing a rusting hulk that had been a pickup. The pickup looked to have been in a small-scale disaster; it had dents and gouges in it, particularly the bed, where twisted, rusted steel was rolled back in a gaping death wound. What wasn't rusted was sooty and Pam thought that the gas tank must have exploded. She peered at it, trying to figure out what model and year it might have been, when a fresh gust of wind pushed against her, followed by a sprinkling of rain.

Pam shivered. With a last glance at the sky, she started back toward her car, zipping her jacket around her. Not fast enough. In the space between heartbeats, the clouds opened and rain began to bounce off the roadway, the car and Pam's unprotected head. Her hair quickly began to stream water directly down her back, as she jogged the rest of the way to the car, only to suddenly freeze when she heard a slither behind her. Her mind shrieked *snake!* as the sound intensified. She spun around, her

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heart pounding and her body crouching, ready to jump, but there was nothing behind her, nothing alive. Just sand on the move.

Part of the dune across from her shuddered and then fell away. Within moments, the gully where she'd seen the pickup was gone, filled by the shifting sand. Still shaky, she moved closer to the new edge of the roadway and watched as the sand quivered under the heavy rain. Anything larger than a gerbil would find itself sucking sand the minute it stepped anywhere within ten feet of the trembling, supersaturated mass. Pam slowly rose from her semi-crouch and made herself walk slowly back to her car, all the while feeling as if malevolent eyes drilled into the back of her head.

She thought it was good that the pickup was covered. It would be better, far better, if the water drained away and the sand packed itself tightly into every crevice and cranny, blotting that hulk away from prying eyes until the sky fell and the rivers claimed the land. Far, far better. It would be a blessing. She paused only a moment and then, without looking back climbed into the car, started it and continued on.

After her brief stop at Sand Lake, Pam realized that night was coming on and she still hadn't found a place to stay. A quick look at the map showed that two more small towns lay along the loop, Netarts and Oceanside, before the loop arced around the west side of Tillamook Bay and into the city of Tillamook. She decided to see if either town had anything to offer and as soon as she entered Netarts, she started looking for motels.

She spotted several within a mile but every one of them had a blazing, unfriendly 'No' lighted up before the 'Vacancy' and Pam began to doubt that she'd be able to find anything. Quite a few people seemed to be out and about Netarts, determinedly enjoying the fading summer despite the rain squalls.

She drove around an uphill curve, through a stand of dark Douglas fir and found herself in Oceanside. Houses appeared

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magically, closely spaced, with only a few trees here and there. The ground fell to the west and she could see a narrow beach a hundred feet away, delineated by a sand dune/ridge bank backed by beach houses nestled side by side. A sharp hill snuggled up to the road from the east and Pam realized that most of the town was built on a hillside. Streets that were steeper than most in San Francisco ran down the hill every so often and she wondered just how fast a skate boarder would get should he be crazy enough to try one of the streets. Too bloody fast, that was sure.

She spotted a 20-mph sign and dropped her speed.

A vague feeling of disquiet came over her, one distinct from the mood that had dogged her as she had driven across the country from Rhode Island. She couldn't place just what seemed out of kilter. Three blocks rolled by before she became aware that almost no tourists seemed to be about. Unlike Netarts, Oceanside held only a couple of moving cars and while there were people walking around, she knew instinctively that they were all locals. A few eyed her suspiciously as she drove by, an unfriendly stare that didn't match anything she'd encountered on the Oregon coast before. These people seemed hostile and guarded and without consciously thinking about it, Pam bristled.

From the look of the houses on the hillside, this was a vacation community, where moneyed people from the Willamette Valley summered and relaxed in second homes bought especially for that purpose. Netarts to the south might welcome tourists, but Oceanside seemed to make its living from accommodating wealthy patrons who wanted things uncluttered by tourism and very, very private. With a sinking feeling, Pam doubted that she'd be able to find a motel, any motel, much less one that had an empty room.

Night was still nearly an hour away as she pulled off the roadway into a parking lot near the base of the point that cut off the beach and extended several hundred feet into the ocean. The point stood

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about two hundred feet high and when Pam traced the street she'd been following, it ran up the hill next to the point in switchback after switchback, finally climbing to the top and vanishing over the ridge line. There was a big building of some sort on top of the ridge. Pam examined it for a few moments and then reached under her seat for a pair of binoculars. She could make out part of a sign and realized that the building was a motel, but she couldn't see anything to indicate if there still might be a room available.

"Well, damn it," she muttered to herself. She was hungry and tired and on edge, for no reason that she could tell. The restaurant she had seen just before the beach parking lot looked good, and while she was there, she could beg a telephone directory. She grabbed her purse before she locked up the car.

As she got out, she looked around, noting the other cars in the lot. She spotted a BMW, a Lincoln, a Jeep 4X4 and a nicely restored blue Jimmy pickup. No one was around as she climbed a set of five stairs to the sidewalk and headed for the restaurant.

She passed a Century-21 Realty and glanced at some of the homes listed there. And then stopped. *Judas Priest*, she thought. *There certainly are a lot of them.*

A quick estimate showed that there had to be thirty or forty houses for sale, the cheapest of them starting at \$200,000. She quickly read the description and then shook her head. Very strange. A house like that should sell for half again as much. Unless housing prices were like this all over the area, quite a few people really wanted out of the hamlet of Oceanside. Enough to sell at what had to be a major loss.

She peered at a small sign on the glass door and read, "Closed Till November 1, Family Emergency." Pam frowned, the sign sending a brief chill down her back that she couldn't explain.

The wind that had been blowing most of the day died down and in the new quiet, Pam found that the surf seemed to echo off

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the hills. For a moment she seemed to be surrounded by the ocean sounds and she looked around, wondering. With so much vegetation, an echo seemed odd but she couldn't deny what she was hearing. As she gazed around, she noticed that the street at this end of town seemed deserted, except for a tall, stocky kid of about twenty, with short blond hair and a wide eyed expression, who was leaning on the side of a building across the street from her. She regarded him for a moment. He noticed her look and smiled crookedly before looking away down the street to the south.

*Must be waiting for a ride*, she thought, as she headed for the restaurant again.

The Beach Restaurant had the usual fishing, coastal motif with nets clinging to the wall and stuffed fish tacked up here and there. The alcove was framed by a low railing and to her left was an old-fashioned mahogany bar with plush, low backed barstools. From where she stood, she could see both sides of the wall that separated the bar from the main dining area and two waitresses moving between tables at the far end of the building. Tables were set in two sections, divided by a dark wooden half-wall that cut across the room in front of her. The cash register stood to her right, surrounded by tourist gewgaws, maps, brochures and an extensive pastry counter. Pam eyed the sign which told her to "Please wait for a Hostess" and looked around again. Prompted by the rich pastry smells, her stomach grumbled and then subsided, its message delivered. After a minute or so, Pam sighed to herself and then decided to try an approach through the bar.

She found a stool near the entrance and climbed up onto it; the top hit her right above the top of her belt. Once perched there, her legs found a convenient rung and she looked down the bar to the bartender quizzically.

He smiled thinly and nodded, before turning back to the couple sitting across from him. They exchanged a few more words

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and then he took some money from them, rang it up on the till and came down to see what Pam wanted.

Like the kid outside, the bartender was a big man, standing at least six two and massing about two hundred and fifty once very solid pounds. His hair was thinning on top and combed back so that it was impossible to tell just how long it really was. Cleanshaven, he had a square chin and a nose that looked to have been used aggressively too often in the past. Brown eyes were sunk under a heavy brow that was topped with thick, bushy eyebrows. Pam judged him to have been something of a brawler at one time, and wasn't surprised to see that his knuckles looked knobby and scarred. "What would you like?" he asked, his voice soft and gentle. He acted as if he was afraid he might scare her away.

"What do you have on tap?"

"Miller and Henry's both," he replied, making rubbing motions with a towel, polishing the bar in front of her.

Pam thought about it and then shrugged, "I don't know Henry's; how is it?"

"You must be from the East Coast," he replied, grinning. "Henry's is out of Portland. Better than Miller's."

"Okay, I'll have a glass then. What's the chance of getting a table for dinner?"

He looked to his left through the waitress entrance and then chuckled. "Pretty good, I'd say. Just a sec." He walked down to the door and leaned out, speaking softly again. Pam watched with some interest. A nice bartender and standoffish waitresses. Odd combination. She wondered how they managed to stay in business.

The two at the far end of the bar glanced at her speculatively a couple of times, their expressions the shy side of neutral. They looked as if they'd would prefer not to share the bar with her.

The Beach Restaurant had an odd feel to it, Pam decided. Not openly hostile, but indifferent. As if the people inside had the

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curiosity and warmth sucked out of them. The bartender was the most friendly of the bunch and even he had a tentative feel about him that put Pam on her guard. She suspected that the town had fallen on particularly hard times, though she couldn't fathom why. The people who lived here had to have some source of income away from the town, or they wouldn't be able to live here at all. There was no industry, no tourism to speak of, no harbor, nothing to bring in or make money. It smacked of the East Coast getaway towns that had sprung up for the rich at the beginning of the last century. The only people employed in towns like that worked for the rich and generally lived someplace else. Jekyll Island off the Georgia coast came to mind.

But Oceanside seemed to have been stillborn, the promise of wealth flowing in from someplace else draining away and leaving a town that had yet to decide what it could or should do. Pam felt a momentary sadness for the community and let it pass. There were far worse things that could and did happen to a town.

The bartender came back. "You can have a table anytime you want. Just take your drink and go on back."

Pam paid him. "Thanks . . ."

"Jack. Jack Westfeld."

On impulse, Pam put out her hand and replied, "Pleased to met you, Jack. I'm Pam Whitby." They shook once and then he turned around and began to draw the beer for her. "By the way, could I borrow a phone book? I still need to get a room for the night and I want to see what's available."

Jack nodded and finished drawing the beer. He handed it to her and then reached under the bar. He felt around for a moment and then pulled out a well thumbed phone book. "Try the Inn on the Hill. They might have a room."

The woman at the end of the bar, closest to the doorway into the dining room, laughed sourly and then whispered some-

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thing to her boyfriend. Jack nodded ruefully. “Yeah,” he added, “I guess so. Probably has a room.”

“Why would that be?” Pam asked. Her professional instincts were fully aroused now. Something definitely not right here.

The woman at the end leaned her way and blinked owlishly. In a slurred voice, she answered for Jack. “Because this town is falling apart and nobody wants to stay here any more. That’s why.”

Her friend took her by the arm and whispered something to her and gave the arm a slight shake. The woman shrugged her arm free and then went back to regarding the drink in front of her, as if it would answer questions and grant requests. Pam looked to the bartender for amplification but he just shook his head.

Pam grabbed her beer and headed for the dining room.

A waitress greeted her as she came out of the bar and led her over to a corner table, with a view of the point to the north and the ocean. She was younger than Pam by a few years, had large, almost violet eyes and lustrous black hair tied back with a bright peach color scarf that hung slightly over one shoulder. Her expression was professionally cheerful and had about as much warmth as a gecko lizard might have on a cloudy, windy day.

Pam took the menu from her and sat, facing north toward the point and then sipped her beer before looking at the menu. The cool, golden liquid was just what she needed and she found that Henry’s was every bit as good as Jack the Bartender had intimated. Another swallow went down and she realized just how hungry she was.

The menu held few surprises. It was pricey, but about what she expected. The waitress came back with water and after Pam nodded to her, began to recite the day’s specials. Pam listened politely and then went back to deciding between the grilled seafood platter, the swordfish, or the fresh flounder.

Pam had never been much of a fan of seafood, having grown up in the Seattle area and been forced to eat more fish than she really

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liked. The years she'd spent in Rhode Island had been nearly as bad — everybody there was expected to be a seafood fanatic too, though the reason escaped her. But, it was good to have a change and for the past three weeks, she'd contented herself with too much junk food from drive-through places. The idea of a genuine, sit-down, have a choice of salad or soup meal appealed to her tonight. The waitress, Jill, wandered back with coffee.

"I'll have the flounder," she ordered, "rice, whatever chowder you have, and a coffee, now. No cream."

"Would you like an appetizer?" the woman asked with a slight but now genuine smile, as she poured the coffee. Waitressing could be wearing work and this customer looked to be a nice, quiet change: Not too demanding and definite about what she wanted. That was always appreciated.

"Got a suggestion?" Pam asked.

"We have a really good crab cocktail. I don't know what Micki does to the sauce, but it's great."

"Fine. That would be just the thing." As Jill started back to the kitchen, Pam called out, "Thanks."

The woman nodded over her shoulder, some more of the reserve gone.

Pam opened the phone book and quickly looked up the yellow page ads for motels, scanned down the list, and then pulled out her cell phone. She dialed the Inn on the Hill, and listened to three rings before it was picked up.

"Inn on the Hill. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have any rooms available?"

"We do. Both single and double."

"Would you reserve one for me? A single. I'm eating dinner at The Beach Restaurant and should be up there in an hour or hour and a half."

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After a few moments of questions and answers, Pam sat back feeling more relaxed than she'd felt most of the day. At the least, she'd have a good meal tonight and some place to sleep.

Jill brought the crab cocktail and the coffee, and Pam settled herself down to brood and eat slowly. While she watched, the sun sank into a fog bank that began to creep slowly toward the shore. As dusk set in, the restaurant was engulfed in billowing clouds that muffled the surf outside and seemed to smother any sounds inside the place, even in the bar. Jack Westfeld turned the heat up, not noticing that the gauge read 70°. He cranked it to 80° without a thought. Fog as thick as this made everything seem remote, damp and cold, no matter how well protected you were. Outside, only the screeching of the gulls could be heard over the muted, whispering surf.

Dinner turned out to be excellent. The flounder was succulent, lightly spiced with a lemon-garlic sauce that lingered on the tongue pleasantly, only to fade away before the next bite. The rice pilaf also had a pleasant spiciness, and had the texture that only perfectly prepared rice pilaf has. Sitting decorously between the flounder and the rice, Pam found a wonderful string bean and almond dish that she'd never encountered before. She finished that before the rice and the flounder.

Over a second cup of coffee, Pam found herself regarding the view to the north, now lit with outdoor lamps that in the fog resembled huge puffballs. They lit the walkway back to the parking lot and even illuminated the beach directly in front of the lot. She couldn't really see the lot itself very well — it shimmered in and out of view as the fog eddied, thickening and thinning in the light breeze off the ocean.

Pam shook her head in irritation. She wasn't given to moodiness, nor did she tolerate it well in others. Her sudden decision to pick up and move hadn't exactly been stereotypical Pamela

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Whitby either, but she figured the circumstances wiped out that inconsistency, and then some. The sudden death of her fiancé eight months ago and the subsequent pitched battle with his family had taken more out of her than she cared to admit. When odd events started to dog her, she'd known it was past time to look for a new beginning.

The waitress came back with a pastry list and Pam shook her head sorrowfully. "Thanks, but I'm afraid I don't have any room left. That was a wonderful meal."

By now, Jill had warmed up considerably and smiled. "Micki knows her stuff. I think she's the best cook on the coast."

Pam arched an eyebrow at that. "Cook, or chef?"

Jill chuckled softly. "Cook — she refuses to be called a chef. Gets mad when you call her that."

"Well, in any case, she did a wonderful job. Thank her for me."

"Will do." Jill moved away to one of the other four tables she had and Pam went back to her coffee, intending to finish it quickly and get to her motel room.

She was just drinking the last of the coffee and looking around for the check, when she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye. She frowned and looked through the window directly in front of her toward the parking lot.

The fog eddied, swirling before her and she had the damndest sense that there was something out there on the sand, directly in front of the lot. Something large and dark enough to contrast with the sand. Some *thing* not somebody.

A chill ran down her back as the amulet she wore around her neck grew hot and she could feel the protective spell it carried assert itself. Pam found herself standing up, straining to see through the billowing mist and abruptly, the fog thinned enough to make out the railing of the lot. Three or four figures, people, stood

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there and as she watched, they climbed the fence and leapt to the sand below, to vanish into the darkness and fog. Without thinking about it, Pam stood up and let out a yell, pointing.

Heads craned and conversation stalled as the dozen or so in the restaurant stared in astonishment at her.

Jill scurried over, her face flushed with concern and fear — did she have a nut case on her hands? She tried to grab Pam by the arm but Pam shook her off. “There’s somebody in trouble out there,” Pam snapped, thinking quickly. She could no more tell the woman what she actually had seen than she could claim to be Elvis reborn. “A fight. Looked like two or three beating up on a kid. I think they fell over the railing onto the beach.”

Real concern appeared on more than one face. “You’d better get somebody.” Pam continued. “I’ll be back to pick up my stuff — charge my meal to this . . .” she shoved her wallet into the startled waitress’ hands. Over her shoulder she yelled, “Use the Visa, not the MasterCard . . .” and she was gone, running through the restaurant and out the door.

Jill yelled for the other waitress to call the police and jogged back to the front of the restaurant. “Jack, better go with her,” she called out to the bartender as she glanced around the end of the wall. “She said there’s a fight down by the parking lot.” He nodded once and took off through the front door.

Outside, Pam rummaged in her jacket for her keys and had them out and ready by the time she reached her car in the lot. She unlocked and jerked the door open and then grabbed her 9mm Beretta from a slot under the seat. She ran to the fence and peered into the fog.

Over the muffled sound of the surf, she thought she could hear the sounds of a struggle, now moving away from the lot toward the sea. Behind her she heard footsteps, but she didn’t wait; she gauged the distance to the ground, climbed the fence and jumped.

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Jack Westfeld had been followed by several from the bar. As Jack reached the railing where Pam had been but moments before, the lead man, Oliver Garcia, scanned the beach and let out a yell of surprise. Or fear. Wordlessly, he pointed toward the ocean and dimly, through the fog, Jack could see a misshapen figure shambling into the surf. It appeared to be dragging something with it. Something that struggled weakly.

The fog shifted again and the shape disappeared in the billowing darkness beyond the light from the parking lot. Jack didn't hesitate a moment longer, but followed Pam.

Garcia wasn't so quick to follow and instead, took the longer way around, following the walkway and leading the other three men from the bar. None of them had seen what Garcia had and just what he thought he saw, no one ever knew.

When Jack caught up to Pam, she was crouched over a figure sprawled in bloody sand. Something had nearly ripped the boy to shreds and it was clear that he was dead. His expression was one of faint surprise and Jack felt sick to his stomach. The kid must have died before the pain had a chance to hit.

Pam cursed as she looked around and not seeing anything in the vicinity, sprang up again. "They must have headed into the surf— come on." She rushed into the fog again, this time thumbing the safety off and beginning to look for a target. Whatever had killed the kid wouldn't spare the others for very long. The thing stank of evil appetite so heavily that she had to breathe through her mouth to keep from choking. She wished Kevin was here— he'd know what the hell it was.

Grimly, Pam reminded herself that Kevin was dead and continued to scan the water.

She found the second body at the edge of the surf and this one was a girl. Her face was unmarked and like the boy, her expression held only the merest trace of surprise. Her right arm

## *CH. 1: RIP TIDE*

had nearly been ripped from her body and the slashes across her stomach and chest had disemboweled her. Pam growled a low animal growl in the back of her throat and began wading into the surf, eyes questing ahead, gun following her eyes with each sweep of her head.

The fog seemed to part in front of her and she saw the figure again, this time well enough to see that it looked much like a huge human being, but out of proportion, the shoulders and hips too large, the legs bowed like a cowboy's and heavily muscled. The head was set square atop the shoulders with little or no neck. In the dimness, Pam couldn't be certain, but the thing seemed to have a greenish cast to it and a roughness that raised the hackles on Pam's neck.

She set herself and took aim, only to pull up when she realized that the thing held someone; the poor bastard still struggled weakly. Pam cursed, knowing that she would be just as likely to hit the captive as the thing, under these conditions. As she watched, the figure vanished, sinking into the water, gone.

She heard something behind her and turned to see Westfeld to her right, his face contorted and sick. A third body floated before him, washing up against him with each wave. He flinched.

Pam thumbed the safety on and stuck her gun in her pants as he came over. This body was of another teenage boy, dreadfully cut, and missing the head. Pam's own dinner threatened to come up but she gritted her teeth and put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "It's gone, whatever it was. Let's get him back to shore. Did anybody call the cops?"

Jack took a shuddering breath and nodded, his expression hardening as he fought for control. Grimly, he took the body in a fireman's carry and followed Pam as she made her way back toward shore.

## *RED TIDE*

The others had already discovered the first bodies and moved the one that had been in the surf back to lie near the first one. Oliver Garcia turned out to be a volunteer fireman and kept everybody away from the first body, reminding them that with a murder, anything might prove useful as evidence. Warily, Westfeld lowered the third victim to the sand and looked around at the others. His voice was thick. "Did any of you see it?"

"See what?" a bald man asked, looking both terrified and sick. He couldn't look away from the three bodies.

"That thing. That thing that did this and dragged somebody else into the ocean." Westfeld panted. His eyes were wild and his volume began to mount.

"I didn't see nothing," the fourth man said. He stood back from the others and looked as if he would bolt and run in a moment. "I didn't see nothing at all. Just you pulling that body out of the water. You and that woman." Pam knew that he lied but she suddenly realized that as it now stood, only Westfeld and Pam herself would admit to seeing anything. She just hoped that the police didn't start casting around for a scapegoat.

Westfeld looked over to Pam and she could tell he was having second thoughts. They fell quiet, silence enfolding them all, muffled by the fog and the softly surging surf. A siren started up and they could see the flashing blue, red and amber of a police car, followed by an ambulance. Still in silence, they waited for them.

None of them would stand with their back to the sea.

## *Ch. 2: Cross Currents*

The police took three hours before they would let Pam and Jack Westfeld go. The cops had questions; they had suspicions. They had misgivings. Jack and Pam had nothing.

Frustrated, the cops tried to take their misery out on Jack and Pam, only to find that neither of them was in the mood to stand for it. Pam finally agreed to come to the State Police office in Tillamook the next day, but made it clear that she considered it a waste of time. Without a backward glance, Pam stalked off, with Jack tagging along. He caught her attention and nodded toward the restaurant and Pam remembered that she had left her wallet there.

Westfeld invited Pam back to the now closed restaurant and after letting himself in, proceeded immediately to the bar where he poured himself a triple of Old Crow. It didn't stay in the glass very long.

Without a word, he poured himself a smaller drink and then looked at Pam quizzically. Pam nodded and gratefully accepted the bourbon he poured her. He added a soda side for her and then drank half a glass of soda himself. Pam watched as his hands steadied. Finally, after a couple of minutes of silence, Westfeld said softly, "I didn't think I'd ever see anything like that again. I wish to Christ I never had."

Pam eyed him critically, gauging how to say what she wanted to say. During the interrogations, Pam had pulled Westfeld up short with an unobtrusive heel to his left foot when it looked like he might describe what they had seen in detail. She'd smoothly inserted her description when he grunted and looked at her.

He hadn't made an issue of it then and Pam had notched up her opinion of him. Jack seemed to know when to keep his mouth

## *RED TIDE*

shut without something the size of a Volvo falling on him. She briefly considered comparing notes and rejected the idea. She didn't want to broach her suppositions until she had more to go on. It had been dark and with that much adrenaline running free inside her, she'd prefer to think things over.

"You've seen this before?" Pam asked, drinking some of the bourbon. Soft fire cascaded toward her stomach and she put the drink down carefully before drinking some of the soda.

Jack regarded her for several seconds before answering. "Yeah, I've seen bodies before. In the Gulf War." His expression tightened. "Didn't like it then or there, and I don't like it any better here and now." He drained the second drink and then replaced the bottle with the others back above the bar behind him. His expression grew guarded as he looked back to her. "You didn't need to hop up and down on my foot, by the way."

Pam met his gaze, her own expression neutral. "Sorry. My foot must have slipped."

"Twice?"

"I stutter."

Jack smiled slightly and shrugged in response. "Do you have any idea what . . ."

"No." Pam spoke more sharply than she intended. She tried to soften it with a smile but the effort felt grotesque. "Right now, I don't even want to speculate. I want to sleep on it and get some balance back before I start examining what I think I saw." She looked away, down the bar toward the ocean, just barely visible through the archway to the darkened dining room. Pam knew her intentions weren't going to ensure any type of sleep but didn't see any need to tell Westfeld that. "Look, thanks for the free drink but I think I'm going to see if they held my motel room. You going to be around here tomorrow? By then, I think I'd like to discuss just what we actually did see."

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

Westfeld nodded and cleared the now empty glasses. He spotted a slip of paper tacked to the cash register and read it before he turned and looked around under the bar while standing back. He apparently found what he sought because he grunted and reached in under the bar and retrieved a woman's wallet. "Don't forget this," he said, handing it to her. Pam nodded and replaced it in her jacket.

Jack came out from behind the bar, wiping his hands on a towel absentmindedly. He led the way back to the front of the restaurant and unlocked the door for her. As he opened it, he looked at her critically, "What the hell do you do for a living? You were out of here like a gut-shot cat. The next thing I know, you're packing a gun. It's like you expected trouble."

Pam sighed softly. She didn't feel like doing any explaining right at the moment. As she glanced around the empty streets, she realized with a shock that that same kid she'd seen earlier when she'd entered the restaurant for dinner, was now standing down the street a block and a half, leaning against a telephone pole just across from the beach parking lot. Hot eyes seemed to bore into her as she locked gazes with the kid and a cold chill went down her spine. The kid looked angry and upset and maybe a little bit scared. He straightened up as she started to reply to Jack's question but didn't make a move to approach. He looked like he wanted to, but couldn't for some reason.

She pulled her gaze away and turned to Westfeld. "I'll explain that tomorrow, maybe. Jack?" she asked, her voice lowering almost to a whisper. Jack cocked his head and waited for the request. "Who the hell is that kid over there? Do you know him?"

Jack glanced around for a moment. "What kid?"

Pam stiffened for a second and then glanced quickly over to where the kid had been. Gone. Her lips thinned and she narrowed her eyes; *Judas Priest*, she thought. *That's all I need.*

## *RED TIDE*

“That kid,” she covered, continuing without a pause, “who was outside the restaurant earlier, right when I first came in.” She described him.

Westfeld thought for a couple of moments. Finally, he shook his head. “Sounds familiar, but I don’t recall seeing him. I didn’t have any reason to notice him then so he could have been there and I might have missed him. He sounds familiar though.”

“Keep him in mind. He looked as if he might have been there a while — like he had to wait for a ride that was going to be some time in coming. He might have seen something.” Westfeld shrugged, closed the door behind him and locked it. Pam nodded goodnight to him and headed back to the parking lot. The cops still there eyed her but didn’t approach as she got into her car and started it.

As she backed out and began tracing her way up the hill, she concentrated on her driving, leaving any thinking about the evening for later. She felt drained, depressed and damaged. She wanted to drive on out of town, through Tillamook and out of the county entirely. She didn’t want to have to go through what she knew was coming. She wanted to run.

The cops wouldn’t like that.

Whatever had drawn her here wouldn’t like that, either.

Most importantly, Kevin wouldn’t have liked that.



The motel office closed normally at eleven, but there were lights on in the rooms back behind the office. The motel sign had been turned off so Pam had no idea whether they still had a room free. She suspected there would be, the way things were going.

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

Halfheartedly she rang the buzzer twice and looked around the parking lot. She waited a minute and was debating whether to ring a third time when the door opened and a burly man dressed in jeans and a light blue, pullover sweater appeared behind the door and regarded her briefly before unlocking the door. He had dark eyes and narrow eyebrows under unruly dark hair, slightly streaked with gray. He opened the door wide and nodded soberly to her. “You’d be Pam Whitby, right?”

Pam stopped short and nodded warily. He caught the expression and smiled thinly. “We got a call from The Beach Restaurant that you’d be late. We heard about the murders.”

Pam sighed. She should have expected it. Small towns have faster than light communications, inside the city limits. “You saved the room?”

“Of course. I expect you’ll be happy to get into it. Come on in.” He held the door open wide and reached behind the door for a light switch. As the lights came on, a woman appeared in a doorway that led to the connecting apartment. “Ms. Whitby, this is my wife, Barb. I’m Ira Vincent. I’ll get your key.”

Pam nodded to the woman who disappeared for a moment and then came back with a cup. “You look like you could use some coffee,” the woman remarked. “Cream and sugar are over on the table there. We’ll have a continental breakfast ready after six if you feel like it.”

Pam took the coffee and smiled back to Barb. “Thanks.” She lifted her purse onto the counter, pulled her wallet out of her jacket and starting to look for her plastic money.

Barb stopped her. “You’ve been through quite enough already — we can take care of all that tomorrow. Just sign the card and we’ll get squared away later.” The woman’s expression was one of sympathy. She was about fifty and had short brown, curly hair, shot with gray. She, too, wore a pair of jeans and a sweater,

## RED TIDE

though hers was a beige cardigan over a white blouse. She nudged her husband, who had been staring absently out into the darkness. “Ira, why don’t you help her with her bags?”

Ira shook himself, still abstracted. Under his breath he muttered, “What’s the world coming to?” and looked at Pam expectantly. “Bags?”

“Just the small one in the trunk.” At this point, Pam wasn’t going to assert her right to carry anything and handed the keys to him. As he went out to her car, Pam turned back to Barb. “I appreciate this. The police had lots of questions and I didn’t have any answers.”

“I’m sure they didn’t expect you to,” Barb replied, pushing a key into her hand and physically turning her toward the door. “Here, I’ll show you where you’ll be.”

Ira joined them, carrying Pam’s suitcase effortlessly. He may have been slightly below average in height, but his shoulders made up for it all. He was oblong.

Three rooms down, Barb took the key back and unlocked the door, leading into a spacious and tastefully decorated room. A queen-size bed sat against the west wall and Ira preceded the two women in, setting the suitcase down on a long, brown padded seat by the low set of drawers. Pam resisted the urge to flop down on the bed and turned to thank them as they headed back out the door.

“Forget it,” Ira broke in, before she could speak. “You’ve had quite a shock — the whole damn town has, for that matter — but you’ve had it worse. Hope you sleep okay,” he added gruffly. Barb nodded in lieu of speech, sympathetically, and then followed him back toward the office. Warily, Pam stood in the doorway and watched till they rounded the corner, and then removed the key from the lock and closed the door behind her.

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

Chained it. Dead-bolted it. Debated whether to put a chair up under the doorknob and rejected it finally as silly, stupid and superfluous. But she did extract her automatic from her purse and put it under the pillow as she lay down on top of the covers. She pulled the bedspread over on top of her and then closed her eyes, rejected the idea of moving again for twenty years.

The lights stayed on.



The early morning sun woke her out of a troubled sleep. She knew she had dreamed, but could only recall vague, hazy images that thankfully, didn't seem to be connected to the carnage she'd seen the night before. No shattering dreams of torn bodies, no oceans of blood.

Just a vague, ill-defined sense of watching and waiting, a ponderous presence more dimly sensed by instinct than anything overt. Pam should have felt some relief for the uninterrupted sleep, but actually felt as if she hadn't slept at all. A sodden weariness had crept into bed with her the night before, spent the night with her and now appeared to be determined to share the rest of her life.

She got up slowly, her eyelids scratchy and her body aching, and immediately decided breakfast had to come after a soak and fresh clothes. She cracked her suitcase only wide enough to pull out toiletries and started a tub of the hottest water she could tolerate.

One of the very few good things about being small was that every tub she encountered was at least adequate. In better hotels, she sometimes felt as if she could swim laps. This one was

## RED TIDE

somewhere in-between adequate and Olympic and she floated in the almost scalding water contentedly for almost twenty minutes before washing and rinsing her hair, and then scrubbing the rest of her body. The water had cooled somewhat by this time so she opened the tub and started the hot water again,

Suddenly, Pam let out a yowl as the water coming into the tub changed from hot to boiling. She scrambled backwards, her right hand burned from the steaming, boiling water gushing into the tub.

She found her feet and as the water temperature skyrocketed around her legs, jerked at the sliding glass door of the shower/tub enclosure, and nearly sprained her wrist as the handle popped off in her hand. The glass refused to budge. Steam, billowing in great clouds, filled the upper half of the bathroom and Pam found herself perched on the rim of the tub itself, one foot on either side.

The drain choked off as the lever moved by itself to the upright position. As she watched, the knob that controlled the water flow, directing it either to the shower head or the bathtub faucet, slowly began to pull outward and water began to trickle from the shower nozzle.

Pam looked up and jumped for the aluminum support frame over the glass doors, hoping that the tub enclosure framing wouldn't give way. She began to pull herself up over the rough aluminum, scraping herself painfully on her arms and breasts. She got her elbows over the edge and swung her legs to the right in a convulsive motion, just as the shower head came on full blast, the boiling spray just sliding past her. In a second she'd rolled over the glass doors and hung for a moment while the spray nozzle tracked her against the glass. As she let go and dropped to the bathroom floor, the glass doors started to slide open.

*Sweet Jesus*, she thought, and started to turn to the door, only to back off as the shower spray shot across the room block-

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

ing her way. She'd never get through it without getting burned. She backed away, huddled up against the wall and began to take stock of just what was happening, her hands clenched in fists.

The showerhead started spinning wildly, swiveling this way and that trying to reach her, but to no avail. A half-minute more and the water abruptly shut off.

Too shaken to believe it was over, Pam continued to stand up against the wall, staring dumbly around her at the drenched bathroom. The steam slowly began to clear and as it did so, Pam could see that there was something on the mirror. She stared at it for long moments and then began to curse. What she saw was the print of an impossible palm, at least twice as big as the largest hand Pam had ever seen. A palm with six impossibly long fingers. As she watched, it faded from view, leaving only condensation behind, which slowly formed drops and began to run down the mirror.

No, whatever it was that she had chased last night wasn't done with her. She had been marked by it and it wasn't going to give up its prey that easily. They never did.



It took her twenty minutes to clean up the bathroom, mopping up the cooling water after wedging the glass doors closed with some towels. She donned light clothes gingerly, wincing now and then as a scrape protested. Her hand was undoubtedly the worst, but she ignored the pain and applied some lotion to it. Scalded she might be, but no blisters seemed to be forming.

Once her hair was brushed, she donned her jacket, put her gun in her purse and headed for the motel office. She spotted Ira

## RED TIDE

at the counter talking to a young couple dressed in summer clothes. He nodded politely to Pam as she came in and inclined his head to the side, indicating the waiting Continental breakfast. Barb Vincent poked her head out and made a beeline for her, just as she was about to pour coffee. "Grab some coffee and whatever you want to eat," she said in a low voice. "There's been a couple of calls for you already this morning. As beat as you were, Ira and I thought you could use the rest. You can use the phone back here, if you want to call anybody right now."

Pam managed to grab a plain donut with her coffee before Barb ushered her into a clean and trim, orderly apartment with a huge bay window facing north. Pam found herself looking out on a narrow beach with a sheer bluff behind it and implacable surf punishing the trapped sand. A second ridge of land formed the northern border of the beach, the sides steep and treacherous with loose, fractured sandstone. Rubble from the ridge lay strewn at the base of the hill, extending out into the sea forming a jumbled jetty that now, at high tide, could be only barely discerned by the troubled water above it. Tall, imposing spruce and twisted coast pines topped the hills, completed a view that one might have been seen centuries ago.

Absently, Pam listened as Barb began to reel off the calls. She tore her gaze away from the window and began to pay attention. "About six, Jack Westfeld called, said that he'd like you to call him this morning sometime. He offered to take you out to breakfast."

Pam nodded and with interest, noticed that Barb's tone lacked warmth. She wondered if Barb even knew Westfeld and then decided that in a town this small, the answer was probably, *are you kidding?*

"About forty minutes after that, Sergeant Lloyd Kline of the State Police called. He'd like you to come to the station in

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

Tillamook and fill out something or other. Answer some questions.” Barb’s tone suggested that it might not be a request. Pam could understand that, but didn’t think the State Police would really like any straight answers.

“Third, two calls, one from the *Tillamook Sentinel* and one from the local radio station. I told them you’d call back only if you felt like it.”

Pam thought for a moment and then asked, “Did the national news pick up on what happened last night?”

Barb shook her head firmly. “No. There’s nothing in the Portland paper about it and I know that none of the networks had anything on it. Ira and I were watching, expecting to hear something.”

That struck Pam as odd, in and of itself. “Nothing? How can that be?”

Barb looked down and Pam realized that the woman was frightened. Up until now, there’d been no indication that either Barb or her husband had been affected by the grisly murders in the least.

*They certainly mask it well*, Pam thought.

“There’s something about this town,” Barb answered, her voice very low and wooden. She seemed to be half talking to herself. “Things happen and the news people never seems to pick up on it. The *Tillamook Sentinel* runs one or two pieces and that’s an end to it. It’s like we’re in a foreign country, far away from the rest of the US, and nobody’s interested in anything that happens here.” She looked up as she finished, and Pam could see echoes of other things there that were quickly subdued and hidden from sight.

Flatly, Pam said, “This isn’t the only thing that’s happened lately, is it?” The other woman shook her head. “What else? What’s going on here?”

## *RED TIDE*

Barb just shook her head again. “No, I don’t think it’s anything I should talk about. Talking about it just makes things worse.” Her expression firmed up and Pam could see that she’d get no more from her.

“Fourth,” Barb continued, briskly, “there was a call from somebody who wouldn’t identify himself.” Barb shook her head as if to dismiss it.

“Age, sex? Could you tell anything from the voice?” Pam asked. “What did the caller say, exactly?”

“I guess it was a man, maybe an older one. His voice was kind of scratchy. All he said was to tell you that Seaside was nice this time of year.”

Pam thoughtfully chewed the donut and swallowed before saying anything. “Sounds like a suggestion to move on. I don’t think the State Police would be too happy about that.”

Barb shrugged and sat down at the kitchen table. “If you’d like, I can scramble some eggs for you.”

Pam found herself frowning as she turned back to the bay window. What in hell was going on here? First Barb clams up about odd things happening in town, and then is friendly enough to offer a free breakfast. “Thanks, but I think I need to go downtown. Probably into Tillamook.”

Barb nodded understandingly.

Pam looked once more out the bay window, trying to decide what to do first and was again struck by something about the view. Over her shoulder, she asked, “Barb, what is that ridge over there?”

Barb came over to stand beside her and pointed. “That’s Cape Mears. The ridge we’re on right now is called Maxwell Point and that beach down there is called Lost Boy Beach.” A chill feeling, like a darkened spray of brine kissed the nape of her neck, and she turned to look at the woman, but Barb had already

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

turned away, already in the kitchen, cleaning up the morning dishes. Over her shoulder, Barb called out, “How long do you think you’ll be staying? If you’re staying as long as a week, we can offer you a discount. We’re not exactly short of space.”

Pam started to reply that she didn’t expect to be here longer than a day or so, and then stopped; she fingered the amulet and thought. *Obligations*. You benefit from something, you have to pay for it. If she wanted the power that infused the amulet to protect her from malign influences, she had to be prepared to do something in return. Kevin had been most explicit about that.

Whatever she had seen last night, it was a killer. It might even have been lured ashore by her presence. Pam knew that the amulet could be sensed by a number of creatures, sensed as a null, a blankness in an otherwise detailed world. If that was the case, it might even have been searching for Pam, and those four that had died could have been just innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Pam had no choice but to stay and try to deal with whatever this thing was.

To do that, she needed a base from which to operate, one that was truly hers, otherwise some of the protective measures she knew wouldn’t be effective.

*That means buying a place*, she thought.

It struck her as insane for a second and then she shrugged. Hell, she had the money. And when she was done here, she could sell, for that matter. Assuming she lived through the whole thing.

“I’m actually thinking of buying a place here in Oceanside. How long I stay will depend on how much success I have in finding some place I like,” Pam answered finally. Barb looked at her in surprise and nodded as if that made sense to her.

*Right*, Pam thought. *First a realtor, then the State Police. Maybe hit the local historical society — maybe I should get a local map before I talk to the State Police. See if I can find*

## RED TIDE

*back issues of **The Tillamook Sentinel**. All in all, I think I'm going to be damned busy.*



The warm sunlight caused steam to waft up from the broken rocks that rimmed Maxwell Point. Above, gulls, terns and puffins swarmed in the sky, flicking to and fro between the steep cliff and the water. Beyond the breakers, beyond the shallow reef that framed the point, cormorants bobbed in the troughs and peaks, sharp black eyes searched for the faint flicker that meant food. Occasionally, one of them would bob its head and vanish from sight, swimming in swift pursuit of anchovy and smelt, only to reappear far from where it had been, often after several minutes. A cormorant can dive far deeper than one would think, with very little effort.

One had to watch very, very closely, to notice that once in a while, the cormorant didn't surface; the numbers of the birds seemed to diminish as the day wore on, with only a few of the birds taking off for the sky. Two or three did, but no more. By noon, the waves above the reef bobbed this way and that, alone. A few feathers were left to float about on the tide, but that was all.

The gulls watched all of this with red eyes and continued to scream their raucous cries, frustrated that no scraps had come forth for them. They had come to depend on them, the past few months.



## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

Further down the coast, along the beach that separated Sand Lake from the Pacific, Casey Nugent skipped the second day of school and hid out in the trees well back from the coast itself. Behind him he could hear the sound of off-road bikes and ATVs running up and down the dunes. Casey didn't own one himself and didn't really like the sound they made. Well, he wouldn't have to put up with it for more than another three weeks. The state outlawed driving on the beach and Sand Lake between October 1 and May 1. That gave the people who lived in the area a chance to calm down and let those animals that called the beach and the woods home, time to recoup.

Hide was the actual, operative word for what Casey did. A kid by the name of Eric Hasse had promised to rip Casey's throat out if he saw him during the week and Casey figured Eric'd do it. After getting pummeled twice during the last week of school the year before, Casey was a solid believer in Eric's word.

The cause of the contention between Eric and Casey mystified the adults who knew of it. Eric on the whole wasn't a bully. He got along with everybody else in the school, barring Milton Brown, which didn't matter because everybody detested Milton Brown, including Milton.

Casey himself was well liked, though quite a few of the kids thought anybody who collected books and rocks had to be flaky. He kept his mouth shut in class, not embarrassing the others by knowing too much. He gave other kids the answers once and a while. He even loaned money out. The why of Eric's dislike of Casey escaped most everybody.

Both Eric and Casey knew that there was no why. It had been an instant, electric hatred for the two of them the moment eye contact had been made, the day Eric had moved to Oceanside. Basically, until Casey could defend himself, his ass was grass any-time Eric got the opportunity.

## RED TIDE

This week would have been one long, extended opportunity since the class schedules were in disarray. The sophomore history teacher had up and moved abruptly, leaving no forwarding address. Since the music teacher, Ms. Walker, had come down with something so horrible that none of the adults would talk about it, the principal of the school had been forced to shuffle classes around while he looked for permanent replacements. What had appeared to be a pleasant year for Casey — meaning that he had no classes in common with Eric — had turned into a daytime nightmare. Twice a day, once right before lunch and once right before the end of school, Eric and Casey shared the same room.

Not a good idea.

So, Casey had cut to the hills where he intended to spend the next two days of school, until the schedule went back to normal. Now, Casey sat in a quiet, sheltered area he'd fixed up, right at the edge of the beach, where the driftwood had piled up against the trees. He'd scrounged a blue tarp and with some heavy twine and an old book on knots, he'd made himself a shelter to keep off the wind and rain that might happen by. A discarded beach chair he'd come across gave him something to sit on and he'd thoughtfully provided himself with books to read. Coupled with his lunch, he planned to spend a quiet, uneventful, comfortable day

By noon, the ATVs had gone wherever such things go and Casey had finished two of his books. The first book had been *Inferno* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle; he'd enjoyed that and decided he might have a go someday at *The Divine Comedy*, the book that the Niven and Pournelle novel had been based upon. The second had been *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* by H. P. Lovecraft and while he'd enjoyed it, it hadn't been exactly what he'd thought it would be. Lovecraft was fun, probably because he was supposed to be scary but really wasn't. And this book hadn't even attempted to be terrifying, unlike most Lovecraft.

## CH. 2: CROSS CURRENTS

He decided to eat his sandwich and drink one of his two cans of Coke when he heard a patter from the tarp and looked up. Overhead, a cloud of dirty gray stretched from the western horizon to directly over him. He had just enough time to grab his lunch and the Lovecraft book and duck under the tarp before the rain came down in buckets. As he watched the rain, he thought he heard thunder and smiled, casting around to see if he could see any lightning.

Thunderstorms were rare on the coast and it had been a while since he'd seen lightning. As he glanced around expectantly, he thought he caught sight of a flash that seemed to light up the northern sky, off toward Oceanside and he began counting. He got to one-thousand-ten before the thunder hit.

Over the sound of the rain falling on the tarp, he heard the sound of brush rustling and looked back behind himself toward the dark trees that lay between him and Sand Lake. He caught a flash of red and then his eyes focused on a teenager coming from deeper in the woods. He was moving fast, trying to get out of the rain, but Casey figured he really needn't have bothered. The kid was already sopping wet, the long black hair streaming water over a narrow, incredibly pale, pinched face. Casey didn't recognize him but that didn't mean anything, really. The Union High School that served Oceanside and Netarts had a lot of kids in it that Casey didn't know by sight.

The kid skittered to a stop under the tarp and then fell to his knees, exhausted. His breath came in shuddering gasps and Casey started to get nervous. The kid didn't look in too good a shape.

His red shirt was ripped in several places with long gashes. One pant leg had a rip that started at the knee and went down almost to the ankle so that it flapped open on the sand. A second flash of lightning came, casting shadows, followed immediately by a tremendous thundering roar, and Casey flinched. That one had been close.

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Over the gasping and the rain, Casey asked, his voice tentative. "Hey, you okay?"

The kid didn't answer but seemed to gather his strength together. He suddenly lurched upright and turned to look at Casey. With horror, Casey discovered that the kid's throat had been ripped wide open by something, the flesh hanging in tatters. As Casey took a step backwards, the teenager grinned at him, part of his mouth now showing bone as his lips flapped. He stretched out an arm toward Casey and Casey backed up, falling over the rope holding the tarp. With a yell, Casey rolled and headed up the tree line, not looking back. He climbed two dunes, sliding down the backside of each before he even took one look behind him.

But there was nothing there. Taking his heart in his hands, he crept back up the last dune and looked back at his camp. Nothing there. Wearily, Casey sagged to the sand and let the rain wash over him, as he stared at the camp. After twenty minutes, the rain let up and Casey, now shivering with the cold, crept back to the shelter he'd so laboriously made. He went to his pack and pulled out and unwrapped the space blanket he'd put there months ago, thinking it might be useful. After wrapping himself in the blanket, he looked around for some sign, any sign, that he'd seen something. The thought that he'd slipped his leash depressed him, until he considered what the alternative was.

The alternative was that he'd just seen something dead, moving around like it hadn't decided just where to spend eternity. That shook him even more and he was in the process of debating which idea he preferred, when he found a cloth scrap that must have come from the pants that thing had worn.

Casey spent the rest of the day hiking into town along the beach, everything from his camp packed up and wrapped in the tarp. No way in hell he was going to try hiding out there again. And he still had one more day to kill before going back to school.

### *Ch. 3: Flood Tide*

The thundershower took the entire town of Tillamook by surprise. The weather forecast had been for variable clouds and 30 percent chance of rain. What the town got was a dark gray sky and 100 percent torrents. Pam had just come out of the Tillamook State Police Headquarters and was caught out in the open, two hundred feet from her car with no shelter within fifty feet. She looked around quickly, noticed that most of the people out on the street seemed to be shrugging it off with a detached ambivalence and reflected, as she sprinted for an awning three buildings up the street, they must be used to getting soaked.

It was about that time that Pam discovered two of the reasons a lot of Oregonians don't bother to run when it rains like that: First, it's already too late, and second, lots of water makes for lots of slick. Pam found her legs going out from under her about five feet from the awning and narrowly avoided falling flat on her back by grabbing a telephone guy wire as she went down. Rude but friendly laughter washed over her as she started to pull herself upright and a strong, large hand grabbed her gently under the arm and lifted.

"I'd get sneakers if I were you," the voice said, from somewhere above and behind her. "Unless you like skating on wet concrete of course."

Pam swiveled around and glared at the old man who towered over her by at least eighteen inches. A shock of thinning, white hair topped the large figure, dressed in a blue cloth jacket shedding the rain like it was oiled. A bland, pleasant face, clean-shaven with long sideburns greeted her, accented with a quiet smile that robbed Pam of some of her ire. He guided her under the

## RED TIDE

awning and looked at her critically. "Come on in my shop and I'll see if I can find a towel for you." With that the man handed her a handkerchief, turned and ambled back into the antique store, ducking his head to miss the doorframe. He was *really* big.

Pam gratefully accepted the offer of the handkerchief. Rivulets ran down her face and she absently rubbed them away as she followed the man. Inside, she found a light, airy shop, with distinctive antiques positioned for maximum effect. Along the wall to her left ran a long glass case filled with jewelry ranging from tacky costume stuff from the fifties, to turn of the century broaches, pendants, and rings. There was a healthy selection of Art Nouveau, a style that Pam had always liked, as well as some things that quite frankly, she'd never seen the like of before.

They didn't look Indian, nor did they resemble any folk jewelry or Far Eastern items she'd ever encountered. Five pieces that sat in a black velvet case caught her eye and she found herself studying them when her benefactor returned.

He stopped at the end of the case and regarded her as she examined the pieces, oblivious to the shop around her. She thought she could recognize onyx, carnelian, and topaz, but the small jewels set in the stones didn't resemble anything she could recall. Maybe it was the cut — an odd, oval one. Or perhaps it was the shade, a deep, almost midnight blue, dark yet luminous. Pam was sure they weren't sapphires but beyond that, she was certain of nothing. Two of the pieces were carved in an abstract form suggestive of an animal, though Pam couldn't be sure what kind.

"Ah, you like some of my recent acquisitions," the owner said. He approached her with the towel extended and looked down at the velvet case. "So new, I have yet to decide on a price for them. Or even if I'll sell them as a set or not. I really haven't decided."

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

Pam took the larger towel gladly and finished drying her face and head. After a moment's thought, she shrugged herself out of her jacket and looked inquiringly at the owner. "Mister . . ."

"Blake. Howard Blake. And you are?" he answered, taking the jacket and going to the other side of the shop. He opened the front of a wood stove revealing a small fire already lit, and spread the jacket across a fireplace poker stand, to dry.

"Pam Whitby. Thanks for giving me a hand."

"No problem. A tiny thing like you is never a burden to lift." He smiled as he said it and Pam decided not to take offense.

"Well, thanks, anyway." Pam looked back at the case and then outside at the rain. Thunder boomed, rattling the windows and the two of them walked to the front of the shop to look out. "I didn't think the coast got many thunderstorms."

Blake frowned as he looked out. The rain still came down in buckets. Almost absently, he muttered a reply, "We don't. This is unusual." After a moment's pause, he continued, to himself. "And it had better stop pretty soon or we're going to have some flooding, I think."

Pam cocked her head. "Really? I thought this area was used to lots of rain."

Blake shrugged and then looked at her as he replied. "We are, but not coming down like that for any length of time. Rain like that," he gestured with one hand, "you can have seven or eight inches in an hour. There aren't many places in the world that are used to that much rain, that quickly."

The two of them looked back out toward the now deserted street in time to catch sight of a lightning strike to the west. Pam raised an eyebrow, surprised. They waited for the thunder and when it rolled over them, the shop rattled as if a minor earthquake had cut loose. Blake shook his head again. "Peculiar weather."

## *RED TIDE*

Pam moved back toward the wood stove and warmed her hands. "I expect that if you find the weather a tad on the unusual, then you wouldn't want to hazard a guess as to how long it's going to come down like this."

Blake chuckled but didn't turn around. "Correct." He continued to look out the window and after a moment began to mutter to himself, something too low for Pam to make out. Pam decided he was one of those who like to talk to themselves and reflected that during a winter on the Oregon coast, his voice might be the only voice he'd hear for days on end. Thunder rumbled again and Pam, for the first time in years, shivered in response. Ill-omens. Right now, she didn't need any more of them.

Blake, still looking out the window of his shop, reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and leaned against the window casement, now staring intently at something. Pam heard the casement squeak as the man's weight settled it further and turned to see Blake shaking his head.

She came over and from beside him, saw a blue Jimmy pickup that was in the process of parking about a block south of the antique store, just off the one-way southbound street to the west. She felt herself stiffening again as she recognized the figure climbing from the pickup and donning a heavy winter jacket.

Blake glanced down at her in interest, shrugged and then looked back at the figure.

"You wouldn't happen to know who that is, would you, Mr. Blake?" Pam asked, voice carefully neutral.

"Howard. You can call me Howard. Him? Name's Bobby." He regarded her with some interest. "Seen him around have you?" His expression was as neutral as Pam's had been.

"Yeah, saw him a couple of times over in Oceanside. Nice old pickup." Pam commented, looking at Blake. At her words,

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Blake blandly smiled at her and turned to regard the pickup. The driver was now nowhere to be seen.

“Bobby doesn’t get into Tillamook too often, not since his accident a few years ago.”

Pam regarded the pickup and decided that whatever the accident had been, it hadn’t been in that pickup. There wasn’t a dent or scratch on it. She considered asking just how Blake might know a kid from Oceanside so well and decided to shelve it. “Hurt bad?”

“You could say that,” Blake answered, now turning away from the window. The rain had begun to let up and now was coming down in a merely steady way, rather than torrentially. He picked up Pam’s jacket, felt it, and then turned it over like it had been a cloth pancake that needed to be browned on the other side.

“How long ago was that?”

Blake began to add a couple of logs to the firebox. He answered without looking, “A while back. I don’t recall offhand.”

“Can’t have been that far back. He doesn’t look that old.”

Blake snorted. “He’s well preserved, is Bobby. He’s older than he looks.”

Pam shrugged and decided that now might be a good time to move on. Her jacket was at least warm now, if not fully dry, and she didn’t see herself accomplishing much with Blake. She still had to find a house today. “Well, I thank you, Howard, for your hospitality. The rain seems to have let up and I’ve got to get back to Oceanside.”

Howard Blake unfolded himself from in front of the wood stove and nodded. “I expect so. The police weren’t too hard on you, were they?”

“Police? Just how . . .”

Blake smiled almost apologetically and pointed to the back. “Police scanner. They described you rather well, Ms. Whitby. I

## *RED TIDE*

wasn't sure until you said your name, but I had a suspicion." His expression grew very serious. "I think what you did last night was remarkably brave, considering everything."

Pam shook her head, wondering just how far the news of her involvement might have traveled. Blake seemed to guess her thought, caught her eye and shook his head. "I don't think too many people would have heard. Police scanners aren't that popular around here due to the simple fact that the airwaves are pretty quiet. And the only time I heard your name actually used was pretty late last night. After twelve, anyway."

"Thank God for that," Pam muttered, shrugging into her jacket.

"Do they know who was killed yet?" Blake asked.

Pam shook her head. "They didn't tell me, though by now I expect they've made some identification." She thought about it for a moment. The police had been neither helpful nor friendly. "What exactly did you hear last night? How did my name come up?"

"The officer in charge of the investigation decided he wanted a detailed background check on you, no reason given. He asked the dispatcher to get in touch with the FBI and whatnot. By now, I expect they know about as much as there is to know, about you."

Pam shrugged. Considering the lengthy and vaguely accusatory questioning she'd already undergone that morning at the State Police, she wondered just what was going on. They plainly wanted someone as a suspect and were frustrated with having no one available.

"Well, there's not a lot to check," Pam replied softly. "A deep background check on me won't show anything too interesting, even to me."

Blake shrugged in return, but his eyes didn't match the gesture; he looked as if he thought a background check wouldn't be

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effective, but should be. She had the chill impression that Howard Blake knew who had secrets and who didn't simply by looking; he had more than his own share to conceal.

A quick glance outside showed that the rain had diminished to a mere drizzle. After one more glance at the case, she smiled thinly at Blake and took her leave. "I may be back in to look at some of your wares, Howard, but I have to run right now. Thanks for everything."

"My pleasure. Hope to see you around." His unvoiced query — was she going to be staying around — went unanswered as Pam left the shop, moving up the street to her car.

Once in her car, she checked her list of things to get done and realized that she couldn't put off the task of trying to find a house, any longer. The idea of high-pressure sales pitches made her tired just thinking about it, but she didn't see any alternative.

Driving around Tillamook for the next hour or two, she saw five or six realty places that might do, but nothing that seemed appropriate. Century-21 and Coldwell Banker seemed to be big in the area, but Pam had a hunch that she'd be wasting her time.

She had about decided to start at the north end of town again or look in a phone book when she felt her eyes drawn to a small yellow building, set back from US 101 about a hundred feet, almost hidden by a self-storage complex. It was two blocks from where the highway ran back together from the one-way grid and didn't seem to have much of a sign. What sign she did see out of the corner of her eye said Necanicum Realty, with a logo that looked something like a mountain rearing up from a long ridge. No neon, just a sign painted in dark blue and white, with brown trim outlining a mountain.

She changed lanes, took a left and waited for traffic to clear before she headed back into town on the one-way grid north-bound. Two blocks later, she turned left again, and then when she

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stopped, she regarded what she could see of the small building from a block away. For some reason, her stomach knotted and she found her palms wet on the steering wheel, as if a flash of heat had washed over the car interior. Her stomach knotted harder and as she started to pull out, she heard a horn blare from her right.

A pickup swerved to avoid her and she caught sight of a man shouting silently at her through a closed window and then he was gone. She started swearing at herself for not looking, and after checking to see the way was clear, pulled out. Her carelessness had nearly gotten her T-boned.

One quick lane change later, she pulled into a small parking lot in front of the building and parked. Once outside the car, her stomach knotted even more forcefully, becoming a painful cramp and she gasped at the sudden pain. Alarmed, she turned toward her car and found herself leaning over it, dizzy and sick to her stomach. The pain fluttered and as she turned away from the building, it ebbed away.

Pam stiffened. She forced herself to turn around and felt her stomach clench itself into a cramp that nearly pulled her over. A sudden fire of rebellion erupted in her and she clenched her teeth, grinding them together as she forced herself upright and began to walk toward the door.

The building had an old fashioned porch with a wide stoop of three steps holding the center between two upright, square, white columns supporting the porch roof. Each step up that stoop was agony with waves of illness and pain until she thought she would surely pass out. At the limit of her strength, her right foot fumbled for the top step and she slipped, falling to the right, her hand clutching at and finally finding the massive square column.

A wave of relief flooded over her, a bucket of cold water quenching her fire-tipped agony and washing it far away to a nether place. She gasped in relief, suddenly aware she was drenched in

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sweat. Her muscles quivered in exhaustion; her breath came in shuddering gasps. She slowly began to regain herself; as she stood upright, she heard the sound of a door opening, and a woman's voice asked, "Are you okay?"

Pam looked up to see a woman only slightly taller than herself, though she might have made two of Pam. She had a round, ruddy face with tightly curled gray hair cut short. Reading glasses perched in front of eyes that had nearly no color at all, a strange gray that now looked blue, then green, and even seemed to partake of brown when the woman moved her head. She wore a light blue cotton blouse, gray slacks and white deck shoes.

Pam nodded, feeling better as each second passed. "Just a leg cramp."

The woman looked unconvinced. "Not enough potassium. I read that somewhere. Cramps are supposed to be caused by some sort of ion imbalance of potassium. Come on inside and I'll get you some coffee and you can sit down." The woman stretched out a hand and had Pam's left elbow before Pam knew it, and firmly walked her into the front office of the building. The woman pointed to a chair and disappeared behind a long, light, oaken counter. In a trice she was back, two coffee mugs in hand. She flopped down in what was obviously a favorite seat and sat back to regard Pam for several seconds before taking a big swallow of coffee.

Pam tried a sip and scalded her tongue; the cup and brew were a hell of a lot hotter than she expected. So hot that she couldn't even taste the coffee.

"There now. You okay? Nothing damaged? No sprains, strains or lingering pains?" Calm eyes regarded her over the reading glasses. Now they looked sea-green.

Pam nodded, tongue still on strike and still smarting. She tried a more cautious sip and found that she could actually taste

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coffee. Not bad, but not particularly good either. “Really, no problem. Just a passing cramp.”

“Didn’t look like that, but I’ll let you call it whatever you want. My name’s Katherine Reardon, Kate. Now what can Necanicum Realty do for you? I’m at your service.”

Pam nodded and sat back, as much in relief at being on the stable ground of a business transaction as anything else. She would have to consider what in hell had happened to her later. “I’m looking for a house.”

“A house? Not just land or a lot to build on?”

“Correct. A house.”

The woman smiled, delighted. “Good enough. Any particular area? Here in Tillamook?”

“No,” Pam replied carefully. “I’d really like to get something in Oceanside.”

The woman regarded her for a beat, and then nodded. “Okay, let me get my book and we’ll see if there’s anything you might like.” She set her coffee down on the table between the two of them and rushed off to a desk, to return with a large three ring, gray binder. She moved some magazines from the table between Pam and herself, turned on the lamp and then set the binder down. She thumbed through it quickly and expertly.

“Up until a year ago, I could have shown you six or seven houses, nice ones, in Oceanside. But now . . .”

“But . . .”

“Oh, things seem to have fallen off, for me at least. I know some of the other agencies around still have a number of listings, but I don’t seem to get any from Oceanside. They all seem to want to go with the bigger realtors. Here we are.” She pointed at the picture, a house set on a lot backed by coast pine trees, stunted and wind shaped. “I only have this one and the next two actually in Oceanside. I have a lot more in Netarts, just down the coast.

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They follow the three from Oceanside.” With that she sat back in her chair, drank some coffee and looked on. High pressure selling didn’t seem to be her style.

Pam eyed the first one doubtfully. It was small, had less than a thousand square feet of space and while it might have been comfortable, she didn’t take to it. She flipped the page.

The next house seemed to jump out of the page at her, and with a start, she realized that she had seen it in Oceanside when she’d first driven into town. It was yellow with a dark buff trim, a modified ranch style, split-level with a double car garage. From the picture, it looked to be set back from the highway more than a hundred feet and Pam found that at odds, somehow, with what she remembered. She carefully read the description, noting it had a fireplace, two baths, three bedrooms and a study, a dining room, and a family room in a basement. Twenty-four hundred square feet.

She looked back to the picture itself and the house seemed to be set closer to the road than she’d thought. She frowned, looking at the picture, trying to see what trick of camera angle could produce the effect.

The effect got gradually more pronounced the longer she looked at the picture, now almost mesmerized. As she stared the house seemed to creep up on her until she found herself seemingly on the walk in front of the door. The realty office around her seemed to fade away and with a start, Pam felt the chill bite of a north wind begin to snap at her.

She was at the door. It was opening for her, slowly swinging wide, a gaping wound of darkness sucking up the light that should have fallen on the smooth wooden floor that the opening door revealed. The darkening brown floor. The opening door. The silence beyond, or did she hear the sound of a frustrated and distant surf? Pam couldn’t tell and knew she never wanted to be able to tell. She felt her hand begin to reach out to the door, per-

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haps to grab it and swing it shut, to at least halt the menacing movement as it inched open wider and wider.

A sudden heat erupted behind each eye and at her throat, a triangle of warmth that snatched away the bite of that infernal wind whistling subliminally in her ears, recalling her to herself. She felt herself poised between two sharp, distinct worlds and in that balance knew she had but a heartbeat to choose.

She closed her eyes and reared back against the unseen pressure she felt. Reared back and snapped free, to slump back against the seat. Pam wearily opened her eyes and seemed to see through a long tunnel, tinged with green and red, the walls of the realty office flowing back into place. She became aware of a insistent voice to one side, addressing her.

“Bad one? You okay?” Pam thought she heard fingers snapping, somewhere to her left. A warm hand touched her cheek. “Christ, I thought I was done with this sort of thing three decades ago,” the voice muttered. “Honey . . . everything’s fine. You’re in a nice, comfortable, safe office and Kate’ll make sure things are okay.” The voice continued to mutter as Pam’s vision slowly cleared.

Pam turned to the voice and found herself looking at the woman in the realty office, what had been her name? Katherine? Kate? Katherine Reardon.

Pam found her voice. “Excuse me . . .”

“Bad one, huh? You don’t look like the type, but I guess looks can be misleading. I haven’t seen anybody trip out like that in a score of years.” The woman’s expression was serious and concerned.

Pam wasn’t tracking. “Pardon?”

“You okay?”

Pam nodded, feeling the warmth behind her eyes slowly fading away. “I think so.” She closed her eyes again, briefly, and then asked, “What happened?”

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

The woman shrugged. “You tell me. You got a faraway look to your face and went pale. Looked to me like you tripped out.”

“Beg pardon?”

The woman looked uncomfortable. “You’re not a user, are you? At least, not normally.”

“User?” Pam had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“Drugs. Acid, that sort of thing.” Katherine Reardon looked at Pam narrowly and then shook her head. “No, I guess not. Could have sworn . . .”

“Sworn what?” Pam found herself getting ticked; the woman damn near spoke in tongues.

Katherine sighed. “You looked just like some friends of mine from long, long ago. Back in the dark ages of the sixties.”

Pam abruptly understood and shook her head. “No, never. Never been a user.”

“I’ll take your word for it. But you looked just like some of the heads I knew who flashed back. I thought I was done with that sort of thing, long ago.”

Pam gave her head a shake to clear it. “No. It wasn’t that. I’m not sure what it was, but about the only drugs I do are caffeine and ethanol.”

The woman smiled openly at that, reached for her coffee and drained the cup. “Well, another cup of coffee certainly wouldn’t hurt me right now. You?”

Pam nodded, even though her cup was still half full. She found herself shivering, the mental image of the house an uneasy addition to her internal landscape. She carefully avoided looking at the picture itself and flipped the page to the third house. Kate reappeared, a coffee cup in either hand, trailing faint wisps of steam. This coffee smelled wonderful and Pam took the cup gratefully.

## RED TIDE

"I'm sorry to have been such a hassle, Ms. Reardon . . ."

"Kate. By the second cup of coffee, I'm Kate. After the third mixed drink, I'm something else again, so we'll stick with coffee." Kate glanced at the binder, noticed that Pam had flipped past the yellow house and nodded. "Wise choice. I never liked that yellow house much myself."

Pam regarded her with a carefully neutral expression. "The people who own it still living there?"

Kate looked warily thoughtful. "I . . . don't think so. Seems to me that they have it rented to a relative. I haven't shown it to anybody in the last five months when the last renters moved out." She drank more coffee, eyes now a slate gray as she considered. "Yes, that's right. They'd rented it to a cousin, but it's been vacant since he moved out." Pam nodded and sipped the coffee herself. The next house would have to be it, she mused as she regarded the picture thoughtfully.

The third house was a nondescript gray, the sort of color wood gets after years and years of weathering. A closer examination of the picture showed that the house wasn't that old, perhaps only ten or fifteen years. A wide bay window was to the left of the covered porch in front of the front door. With anticipation she found hard to understand, she read the list of features: Two story, four bedrooms, study, two baths, dining room, fireplace and 2100 square feet. She took a closer look at the place and realized the house looked very similar to the house she had shared with Kevin. The only major difference was no garage that she could see.

"Garage?" she asked.

"Faces on the south side," came the reply. "The place is way up on the hill above the center of Oceanside, and has one of the few lots with any flat space but it's not very wide. The house sits on a corner and the guy who built it wanted as much front yard as he could get." Pam looked to Kate, to catch a flash of light, faded

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

blue in her eyes. Her expression held a trace of a smile and Pam thought the woman could tell that Pam was already half sold. This place felt right.

“Well, if we can, let’s go out and look at it.” Pam glanced at her watch and saw that it was slightly after two o’clock. “I need to be back in town by four.”

That brought a firm smile from Kate. “Sounds good. We’ll take my car, and I’ll have you back in plenty of time. Got an appointment?”

Pam merely nodded. Kate Reardon had no need to know that Pam would be stopping at the sheriff’s office to pick up a concealed weapon permit that she’d applied for, first thing in the morning. Pam still had difficulty believing how easy it was to get a permit in this state.

Kate again retreated into the back of the office and emerged with a heavy blue jacket which she donned as she headed for the door. She adjusted a clock sign to indicate that she’d be back by four and then locked the door behind Pam and pointed toward the right. Pam followed her along the porch to some steps that hung off the side of the house like a pouting lower lip, and then climbed into a white Chevy Citation that hugged the building. Kate started the car and as Pam buckled the seat belt, launched into a monolog about Tillamook and the area in general.

Thirty minutes later, Pam should have felt that she knew all there was about Katherine Blake Reardon but knew better. Pam thought she detected something hidden about the woman, but what it might be she had no clue. A widow of ten years, Kate had taken over her husband’s business and found that she liked selling real estate; she made a decent living at it even if she didn’t particularly need the money. She’d grown up on the coast and gone to school down at the University of California at Berkley, where she’d majored in History, met her husband and moved back to Oregon.

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She had lived in Newport, Coos Bay and Seaside before Tillamook, where they'd settled for five years before her husband's death at the hands of a drunken driver. Pam shivered at the coincidence.

Pam nodded amicably during the monolog and managed to casually deflect each personal question the woman put to her, revealing very little about herself. A wry thought occurred to Pam. Kate Reardon controlled just how much Pam knew about her by the simple expedient of volunteering exactly what she wanted to reveal in a steady stream; Pam accomplished the same thing by misdirection. Both methods worked very well and Pam decided that Kate Reardon might have some interesting things in her past.

Kate took a different route from the one Pam knew and turned to the north from the highway about a half mile from the turn to Oceanside. Once away from Tillamook Bay, they were immediately surrounded by Douglas fir, the trees cut back from the roadway for a space of twenty or thirty feet. Pam could see houses set back from the road for the first couple of hundred feet before they entered a series of ascending curves, ultimately to emerge high above Oceanside. Kate turned down a hill that matched the worst San Francisco could boast and then took a right into a driveway that connected to the house on the side. From where they parked, Pam could see a fenced backyard with a width of perhaps fifteen feet. The entire house seemed to be sitting on a naturally flat, wedge shaped lot narrow side was to them. A concrete walkway under a breezeway led to the front of the house and the larger front yard.

The view was magnificent. Oceanside proper lay below them, houses dotting the hillside, splashing contrasting colors of reds, yellows and whites against the Kelly green of the coast pines. Maxwell Point stood less than a quarter mile to the north. They were only slightly lower in elevation than the Inn on the Hill and like the Inn, could see to the south for miles.

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

Kate let Pam marvel unmolested at the view before she extracted a key from the depths of her purse and unlocked the door. Pam followed her into the alcove that separated the living room from the dining room on the right. “The Finlaysons moved out about six months ago but I’ve had someone come in and dust twice a month. What furniture that’s here, goes with the house.”

Pam nodded as she looked at a dining room table and chairs. The front room itself had only an old but still attractive sofa, coffee table and home entertainment center, set against the far wall. The house appeared to have wall-to-wall carpeting of a thick, rich brown that went very well with the cream colored walls. A fireplace with a raised hearth and mantel took up most of the far wall beside the home entertainment center.

Kate lapsed into silence, wisely letting Pam look the place over at her own pace. To that end, Pam first checked out the garage, noting the lighting and the well laid out work area along the inside wall with the house proper. Without comment, Pam then moved on to the bedrooms and finally the study or den that took up most the north end of the house.

A strange feeling of security permeated the house, as if Pam had already spent days or weeks in the place. The layout felt familiar and Pam found herself relaxing as she moved from room to room. Whoever had owned the house before had tastes that matched Pam’s and she decided that there was very little that she’d either want or need to do to make the place comfortable. Additional furniture was about the only thing she lacked to move in immediately.

Ten minutes was all that it took to convince her, and at that point, all that remained was to haggle over price. Kate didn’t seem to be surprised and by the time they’d gotten into the car, even that had been settled.

Now, she had a base.

## RED TIDE



What Casey needed was a new and improved hideout. Eric had informed Casey's closest sister, Grace, that if he saw Casey the next day, that he, Eric, would have Casey's kidneys for breakfast. Casey was inclined to take that to be the gospel truth. After hard thought, he remembered that there was a house a few blocks away that had been empty for at least five months and that a desperate kid could more than likely find a way in. So he did. At about 9 a.m.

The house proved to be easy to get into — the garage had a window and the window had a latch and the latch wasn't in use, so Casey went up, over, and in, in about the length of time it takes to use a TV remote. Once inside, he closed the window and found himself a corner.

The garage had a sanitized look that Casey found puzzling. It wasn't as if the place hadn't ever been used. You could see spots where oil had dripped from some forgotten oil pan. You could find places where a careless move had spilled varnish on the back workbench. What you couldn't find was a hint that anyone, at any time in the past, had ever thought of the place as home.

If anybody had actually cared for the house, thought of it as a home, they'd have left some sort of identifying marks. Something nailed to the wall or pinned to the sheet rock. Some waste paper or human debris that always gets left behind when someone moves on. There was nothing.

The concrete floor was smooth, gray and barring only the minor oil stain or two, unblemished. The sheet rock walls forming the interior wall of the house were unmarked and unpainted, the

### *CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE*

taping sanded down smooth but left visible, as if no one had ever gotten around to deciding on a paint color. The rafters above had four by eight foot three-quarter inch plywood laid down over most of it, providing plenty of storage for a family that might never have come. Casey thought about climbing up to see if there was anything left up there, his natural curiosity aroused, but he squelched it quickly. Besides, he didn't see any ready access.

With a sigh, Casey looked around and decided he wanted to be out of sight of anybody who just might look in. He finally settled on a corner between the two windows at the back and outside wall. He'd still be visible from the windows across the garage door, but after he put his tarp up as a screen, nobody'd see him or suspect anything. Only once did he think about trying the door and actually going into the house, but he quickly put that thought aside. If he stayed in the garage, he couldn't see how anybody could get too mad at him. But breaking into the house itself, that was another matter.

Quickly, he pinned a corner of his tarp down on the long workbench along the inside garage wall, using two of his school-books. There was a chair also along the workbench and he moved it over to form the other end of his screen and tied the tarp off on the backrest. That settled, he was about to sit down when it occurred to him that the cement floor of the garage would probably be ten degrees colder than anything he'd care to sit on.

Checking convinced him it had to be twenty degrees. With a sigh, he went through his backpack and after rummaging around, pulled out the thick sweater his mother always insisted he take with him, no matter what the weather. It was wool and Casey put it where it would do the most good, right in the corner where he could sit on it.

Casey checked his watch and saw it was almost nine-thirty. He pulled out a book to read and then fished out his thermos as

## *RED TIDE*

well. It was supposed to be part of his lunch, but as cold and damp as he felt right then, he didn't much care. He poured some hot vegetable soup out and then set his back to the garage and started reading a novel.

All in all, he figured today had to be better than the one before. He wasn't getting rained on, no dead people walking around, and no Eric to beat the crap out of him. He hoped life had more to offer than this, but he was prepared to take what little he could get right then.

Along about noon, Casey dozed off, his eyes slowly closing while he tried to read a Heinlein book. The book slipped from his hands and slid onto his chest as he drifted away. His head drooped.

Odd dream, if dream it truly was. He found himself sitting up in the garage, peeking over the screen he'd made to stare through the garage windows into a darkening night. Faintly, yet distinctly, he could hear the sound of the surf floating up from before the town. Sandwiched in the background between that noise and true silence seemed to be the screaming of gulls and the purring of cars, endlessly driving up and down Main Street. Night was falling.

He found himself up and moving to the garage door, where he stood looking out through the dusty glass. The pane had a patina of grime that gave everything a muzzy quality, much like something seen through a distant, thin mist. He wiped the pane with his sleeve.

That was better, and now he could make out the driveway and the narrow street beyond. No cars were visible, but he felt that some surely should have been. He could hear them outside, their motors a dim accompaniment to the more natural sounds that still haunted his ears. Looking further, squinting, he made out the next street below (which was Main Street) and there he could see the cars as they moved past each other, driving in the night up and down, up and down. Without lights.

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

Casey felt an odd quiver go through him; he thought it might be a good thing that they didn't have any lights on, that he couldn't see too distinctly. Shapes other than cars were moving in the darkness and while he knew they had to be people, he wasn't prepared to bet on it.

After a moment, a movement caught his eye and he looked to the south end of town. All of the streetlights along the main street had been dark, inactive, but as he watched, one came on about six or seven blocks away from him. With a feeling approaching dread, he looked to the next light in line and after a minute, it too turned on, slashing the darkness around it with unwelcome and unwholesome illumination. Five or six blocks away. Something was there. Something was coming.

Another street light came on. Casey began to feel panic; he didn't want to be here and didn't want to see what might be coming. He backed away from the garage door and nearly fell over the chair that held up part of his tarp.

He glanced back to the windows of the garage door and another street light came on, much closer now. Only three blocks away. One down and two away to the south. A sick, desperate hope came to him that it would pass, go on up the street and when the next light came on, two blocks away, he froze, half behind the screen and half not. He counted out his heartbeats, three, ten, fifteen, eighteen. Snap.

The street light one block away came on and Casey shuddered. Acting with a presence he couldn't explain, he picked up the chair and moved it close to the corner and crouched down behind it, throwing the excess tarp over his head as he ducked. Now he couldn't be seen. Now, maybe, he was safe.

Not hardly. He *knew*. If that garage door opened he'd be discovered and that would be an end to him. But what could he do? Go back out the window? A surge of hope swept over him

## RED TIDE

and he almost sprang to his feet to make for the window and then he heard the car pull into the driveway. It parked.

This car, this car had lights on and Casey could see them under the garage door, slantwise, casting lengthwise shadows of impossible length. Idly, he realized he could see each tiny imperfection in the concrete, each low spot a deep, black pool.

A car door opened and after a momentary pause, closed firmly. He could hear firm, heavy footsteps, heading toward the garage door and he thought he heard a rattle, like someone trying the handle of the garage, only to find it locked. A brief surge of hope flared inside him. Maybe it couldn't get in. It didn't have a key. *No key, please, let it have no key.*

The rattle intensified and Casey's heart seem to pound harder and louder, a cadence of escalating panic that choked his throat and clouded his eyes; his head felt like a balloon filled to exploding, waiting for the click that meant the lock had been freed and the door would begin to open.

But it didn't come and his head began a slow leak of pressure as the rattling abruptly ended and the footsteps resumed, going along the walk outside, toward the front door. Casey soon heard the sag of the front stoop under a ponderous weight and the slight tick as a key was shoved into the lock. The door opened and then slowly closed with a faint groan, the wood of the doorframe protesting as the door was closed.

Casey wanted to fold himself into a tight ball but took hold of himself and very carefully lifted the chair and moved it against the back wall, forming a much smaller triangle with the tarp. Now, at least, he would be hidden from sight should the door into the garage open up. He forced himself to sit cross-legged on his sweater and hunkered down. He wished he had the guts to make for the window and freedom but knew he could never coax his legs to stand, much less move with the speed necessary to escape.

### CH. 3: FLOOD TIDE

A part of him questioned everything — he was acting like a four-year-old, scared of his own shadow, scared of sounds for crying out loud. So someone came to the house and went in, so what? There was nothing life-threatening about that, nothing evil.

A part of him focused on a mantra, endlessly repeating: *This is a dream. I'm dreaming. This isn't real, it's a dream, a dream, a dream.* A part of him even knew it was, but none of that mattered. He was equally certain that anything that happened to him in this dream was permanent and likely to be deadly. He knew that as well as he knew it all was a dream.

He crouched like that for an eternity, his heart pounding, his body trembling, now from fear, now from cold. All the while listening with a growing awareness that though he couldn't actually hear anything from inside the house, he somehow knew that something was happening in there, something that should have made enough noise to wake a cemetery of the dead.

*Poor wording,* he thought.

He became aware of a faint odor, slightly acrid and familiar. It grew stronger, moment by moment, but then was replaced by a strong scent that Casey couldn't place for a moment. With a start, Casey realized he smelled the ocean. Kelp, freshly washed ashore, the bladders still whole. After that, the scent became a *mélange* of different odors, all of them strong and coming from the house itself.

Fish, both fresh and long dead and rotten. Mud from the sea floor, much like the marshes around Tillamook Bay, ripe with the smell of tiny, decomposing zooplankton. The smell of aniline, like you sometimes find in a dry cleaners, harsh and unpleasant. All of them blended together, increasing in strength until it became a stench that choked him.

Casey cupped his mouth, stifling a cough that would betray him to whatever or whoever might be in the house. As he did so,

## *RED TIDE*

he heard a low chanting and as his head began to swim, as his vision closed down to a darkening tube, he thought he could make out voices. Voices . . . more than one. Then nothing.

His head snapped up, the dream ended and Casey found himself frozen in an almost fetal position behind his jury-rigged screen. Around him, he could see clearly; it was still daylight outside. How long had he slept?

More than four hours, he thought, as he checked his watch. It was almost five. Casey found himself wiping cold sweat from his face and gingerly stood up, eyeing the garage windows for any sign of a vehicle. Nothing there.

Never had been. He was certain of that. For a moment, Casey considered that he might be losing it, stripping mental gears with a runaway imagination and the real fear of getting his face smashed into pulp.

No, he'd seen what he'd seen yesterday. He had no idea what it meant, whether it had been an elaborate joke that had been pulled on him, or what? He didn't know. And the dream he'd had, that had been brought on by nothing more than fatigue and the shock he'd had yesterday. And Eric. Always that bloody bastard Eric.

Casey gave himself a little shake. That had been odd. Generally, he didn't curse, even in his thoughts. He must be getting closer to the edge than he'd thought. He took several deep breaths to clear his head and decided that no matter what, he was going back home and take whatever his folks decided was proper punishment for his activities of the last two days. They'd probably be more upset with his breaking and entering than with anything else, but so be it. Right now he needed a warm house, a safe one, and nothing out of the ordinary, or he was going to slip his leash and start yammering. He had the whim-whams ruddy awful.

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He quickly packed up his tarp and sweater, stored his thermos and his books and headed for the back door of the garage, only to remember that there wasn't one. He'd have to use the window again. He glanced over to the window and as he started for it, for some reason, found his head turning to the door into the house.

It was slightly open. Casey nearly fainted.

## Ch. 4: Neap Tide

*“You are a clever man, friend John. You reason well, and your wit is bold, but you are too prejudiced. You do not let your eyes see nor your ears hear, and that which is outside your daily life is not of account to you.... Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all, and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain.”*

Abraham Van Helsing

**Dracula**

Bram Stoker

For long moments, Casey stared at the door, unwilling to believe his own eyes. He knew that the door had been closed when he'd first come in. He remembered looking at the door while he considered trying it. He remembered how he'd almost made a step toward it and then reconsidered. It had been shut tight then. No question about it.

Casey drew in a shuddering breath. He found himself making a step toward the door and stopped himself. Someone had opened it while he'd been asleep and then only glanced into the garage and missed seeing him in the corner. He'd been hunkered down, and from the doorway, a person could easily miss him. That had to be it.

He took a step toward the door.

And that dream — the sound of the car arriving, the sound of somebody at the garage door and then going into the house, that had been real. Someone had entered the house and those sounds had been incorporated into his already progressing dream. That made sense.

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