

Waves

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SHAPER Stephen Brooke; Arachis Press 2016 *Waves* ©2016 Stephen Brooke; All rights reserved. The text, art and design of this publication are the copyrighted work of Stephen Brooke and may not be reproduced nor transmitted in any form without the express written permission of the author or publisher, other than short quotes for review purposes. ISBN 978-1-937745-38-7; Arachis Press 4803 Peanut Road Graceville, FL 32440 <http://arachispress.com>; *Chapter 1*; "Did you realize your tenth anniversary is coming up?" asked Michelle. "We haven't been together *that* long," I replied. "And you can't start counting till we're officially married anyway." That was intended as a hint. I very much wanted to be officially married to Michelle Jackson. Or Michelle Sandor. She changed her mind about which to use, day to day. As long as she eventually became Michelle Carrol, it didn't matter to me. "Of the shop." The woman sounded just a tad exasperated. I undoubtedly gave her reason to be. "You opened this place in February of Ninety-One." Charlie looked up from her homework, spread across the round kitchen table. "Do you want me to paint a sign?" she asked. "Oh, I know. A commemorative surfboard!" That really was not a bad idea at all. But I would have to shape one before she could paint on it. "Draw something up," I told her, "if you have time. Passing your test comes first." Charlie was studying for her GED exam at the local branch of the community college, over in Scott City. She nodded. "Will do, Shaper." She looked back into the book opened in front of her. "I think I could have done this without taking the course. Pass the test, I mean." I only nodded. I was inclined to agree. "Ted is rubbing off on you," came from Michelle. "Don't start thinking you can do everything on your own. Now clear those books off the table so we can eat." Michelle was cooking tonight. I was willing to make that concession from time to time; I couldn't expect the girls to eat my bland vegetarian meals every night. Not that I had ever actually prepared large evening meals for myself, being more inclined to 'forage' through the day. This was just one of many changes my routine had undergone over the past three weeks. Well, more than three, if you think about it. Things had started to change the day Janice Bell had come into my shop with Charlie in tow, months ago. Jan would have started her classes this week, wouldn't she? Her last semester at the community college. "Wake up, Shaper." "Miles away again," remarked Michelle, shaking her head. "Stir-fry is ready." She set the big saute pan in the center of the table. One of my pans — the few kitchen items that had come with her and Charlie were mostly still in boxes, out in my workshop. There just wasn't much space for them in here. "And here's the rice," she added, setting the bowl down. It was white rice but that's okay. Sometimes, anyway. There were shrimp mixed in with the veggies. I'm willing to eat those; anything without a backbone is my rule. Except maybe squid and such. They're just a little too intelligent for me to be comfortable with them on the menu. Charlie liberally dosed her plateful with soy sauce, then added more salt. "This close to the beach we probably breathe in about all the salt we need," I informed her. "And you swallow a lot of it every time you surf!" came her giggling response. "Maybe you get way more than you need, too." "Maybe," I agreed. "Jane says the motel still is not on the market," Michelle informed me, as she shoveled rice onto her plate. Jane Warner was the local post mistress. Moreover, her husband was in the real estate business. "So there was probably a sale lined up already before they forced

you out of your lease." Michelle and her daughter had come to Cully Beach to open and possibly buy the *Easy Breezes* motel. She nodded slowly and took a sip of iced tea before replying. "That's what Dick thinks. It wouldn't have occurred to me." "Mom's an innocent," proclaimed Charlie. "Your mom had too many other things to worry about at the time." That was certainly true. Drug smugglers, a dead ex-husband, an alcoholic daughter — and me, I guess. "You could still sue them, you know," I told Michelle. "Sammy thought you had a legitimate claim." I had convinced her to at least allow my attorney to send a letter to the owners. "No. I'm well rid of that place. And I kind of like living with you." That was nice to hear. "Except you need more room," chimed in Charlie. "Oh, I was thinking of turning your bedroom into sales space." I seriously had been considering just that change before the pair moved in. It had been only an unused spare bedroom then. She shrugged. "I could sleep in your workshop." Charlie spent a lot of time back there anyway. In warmer weather it might be an okay place to sleep, but not now. It wasn't exactly airtight. "If you and I don't start contributing around here, we're all likely to be sleeping in the van," stated Michelle. "And don't object, Ted. You can't keep on paying the bills for all three of us." "I probably could, but it would be tight." "John thinks he can get me a shift at the coffee shop," Charlie said. That would be *Coastal Coffee*, where her boyfriend was a manager. "Sure you would want John-boy as your boss?" I asked. Charlie smirked. "It would let me keep an eye on him."
Chapter 2 The poetic temperament's a very nice temperament...but it's an old maid's temperament. Bernard Shaw wrote that. He could have been describing me, except I wasn't alive then. I was the guy who idealized 'woman' but could never make things work out with one. Ted Carroll truly was a bit of an old maid. I do prefer doing things at a set time, in a set way. Having Michelle and Charlie move in upset my carefully arranged apple cart. But change is inevitable, right? One thing that did not change was my early morning routine. I still got up around Five, turned on the coffee maker, and then walked across the street to check the surf. It was cold — not unexpected in January — but quite still and clear, the sky thick with stars. There was no hint yet of the sun over the Atlantic. I crossed A-1-A at the corner by the Bells's house-slash-boutique and continued down the road next to the deserted and quite dark *Easy Breezes*. Even the security light was out. No waves to speak of, not that I expected any. But the ocean can sometimes serve up a surprise, so I always check. Plus, as I said, it is my routine. However, in the past few months that routine had twice led me to happen upon dead bodies. I was hopeful that would not repeat itself in this new year. Or this new century and new millennium, I could say. It had brought some mighty big changes to my life. I headed back through the chill morning air, back to a warm kitchen and hot coffee. Now this anniversary of the surf shop — chances are I would not even have thought of it. Yes, I should do some sort of celebration or promotion or something. Mark the occasion in some way. I stood in front of the *Cully Beach Surf Shop*, this modest little 'Florida house' that had been converted into a place of business. My place. Had that been enough for me? I once thought it was. Obviously, I had been much mistaken. I went on up the drive and in the back door, into the kitchen. No one up yet. I poured myself a cup of coffee and contemplated breakfast. Hmm, grits, I think, and a soft-boiled egg or two. I thought that was a good choice on a cold morn but the girls would most certainly turn up both their noses at such fare. Some water was set to boil and I rummaged in the fridge for eggs. Things were no longer in the places I was accustomed to keeping them. Other things were in their place now, things I would never have bought myself. Also, as a concession to Charlie's problems with alcohol, I no longer kept beer or wine in my refrigerator. That, of course, was of no concern at breakfast time. A door closed quietly somewhere down the hall. Probably Charlie claiming the bathroom. She was almost always up before her mom. I'd have to get that promised indoor shower for them eventually. No one liked showering out back in the cold at this time of year, though I had done it for ten years. Grits were bubbling. In go the eggs. Let everything sit for three or four minutes. I carried my cup up into the shop. Kind of cool in there. No point in heating that space overnight. Hmm, a blinking light on the answering machine. Just one call. "Hi Ted, it's Pat. Wanted to let you know that Betty and I plan to come over next month. She gets the Presidents Day weekend off, y'know. Um, that's the — Seventeenth through the Nineteenth. Talk at you more later!" That would be just the time to have my anniversary celebration, wouldn't it? An holiday weekend would work nicely. About five weeks away so I had plenty of time to get ready. Charlie

was in the kitchen when I returned, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Morning, Shaper," she mumbled, and wrinkled up her nose. "Do I smell onions?" "In the grits," I told her. "Do you think I should add garlic too?" She only grimaced, fixed herself a bowl of cold cereal, and settled down across the table from me, as I stirred the egg yolks into my grits. "Pat and Betty are coming over next month," I said, between mouthfuls. She liked Pat, and his artwork. "Does he have a show?" "Nah, just vacation time. School is closed for the holiday." Betty taught elementary kids. "I'm going to do our anniversary thing that weekend, I think." A door banged. "Mom's up," Charlie said, "or we have clumsy burglars in the place." "We need a dog to discourage them. Is John going to give you a puppy?" The girl sighed. "I don't think it would be safe here, do you? We're so close to the highway." "Yeah, maybe so. Unless it were a little indoor dog." We both noticed the lights at the same moment. Someone had pulled into the driveway. Charlie was on her feet and peeking through a window before I even got moving. "It's a police car," she whispered. I'm not sure why she felt the need to whisper. "A big one, a whatchacallit." "An SUV?" "Yeah. That would be Chief Cotton, wouldn't it?" "Uh-huh." Everyone else on the force drove sedans. Or bicycles. "What the heck is he doing up so early?" Only one way to find out. His vehicle was pulled in behind Michelle's minivan. She parked that on the street during the day but we thought it best to keep it in the drive at night. I stepped out the back door and gave the chief a wave. "Come on in, Bill, and have some coffee. It's too cold to stand around out here!" It was getting light by now and the sun would be above the horizon in a few more minutes. Charlie had disappeared by the time we came back in. Probably felt the need to be more presentable though she didn't seem to care how she looked around me. "I figured you would be wide awake by now," said Cotton. "I know you rise with the sun." "Before the sun at this time of year. Anything on your mind, or just a social call?" "Lots on my mind, Ted, but none of it stuff you need to hear. I was just cruising and thinking. I do that sometimes before going to the station — look over this town I'm supposed to be protecting." He gave me a rather wry smile. "I kind of stopped on a whim." "Any time, Bill." I got up to start another pot of coffee going. "As long as it is after Five." "And before Nine. I know you turn in early too." He glanced toward the short hallway opening from the other end of the kitchen. "Or has that changed?" I laughed. "Some." I turned on the machine and returned to the table. It began to chug as the water heated. "Maybe I need a change, too," said Bill Cotton. He hesitated a moment and then continued, "I'm thinking of retiring." I must have looked skeptical. Bill wasn't that old after all — mid-Fifties maybe? "Yeah, retiring. I could take a decent pension right now. And, well, the city council has been hinting that they want a younger man in the job." I thought about the officers I knew. There were some good men and women but were any ready to be chief? "There's no one on the force who could take your place. Not right now." In a few years, maybe. He agreed. "They would have to hire outside. I suspect there are those who want a clean sweep of the department. Our mayor, included." Bill rose. "Thanks for the coffee and the time. I appreciate it." He started for the door and then turned to me, and added, "Something is going on, Ted. I haven't told anyone else but I am sure something shady is going down at city hall." *Chapter 3* There was surf later that week. It was nice to know that Michelle or Charlie could look after the shop if I played hooky, that I would not need to depend on the part-time high school kids I had always hired. But Michelle was right about the two of them getting jobs, if only for their own self-esteem. Hiring kids was good for the shop, as well. It kept me connected to the surfing community. I couldn't tell you how many boards I had sold because a friend or parent of an employee came into the place. Anyway, I was typically done with the waves and back at the shop by the official opening time of Ten AM. The kids I hired mostly came in after school, giving me a few afternoon hours to work on board building or other chores. I was getting my board into the truck, ready to head for the pier, when Charlie came out, keys in hand. "I'll move the van," she said. It was blocking my way in the narrow drive. "Want to come along?" "Surfing? No way, Shaper. Not until the water gets warmer!" "Oh, I was thinking you might want to sit in the coffee shop and make eyes at John while I surfed." The girl did not deign to answer but got into the old Dodge. It started, which was always a bit of a surprise to me. One or the other of our ancient vehicles was bound to fail one of these days. Charlie waved at me as I backed out and then she hurried back into the warmth of the kitchen. I didn't know if her boyfriend actually had a shift on this Thursday morning.

As a student at the community college, John's schedule might have shifted to accommodate his classes. Like Jan Bell, the boy was in his last semester at the local campus and would have to continue his education elsewhere next year. That might be hard on Charlie — she hadn't had much stability in her life up until now and John Brody was about as stable a kid as I knew. And Jan, her best friend here, would be leaving too. I briefly wondered if young Miss Bell had chosen a major yet. Then I was pulling into a parking space just south of the pier and looking over the waves. Hardly worth the drive, were they? Small lines coming from the north, with a bit of side-wind. Oh well, I had ridden far worse. No one else out, at least not yet. I slipped into double wet-suits, that is a sleeveless 'Long John' over a long-sleeved jacket. That much rubber wasn't necessary most of the time but the water gets mighty cold in January, even in Florida. It was a good thing I had brought the old longboard too. I could paddle it up on my knees and not have water flowing through the suit with every stroke. I needed a new longboard. In time. Too many other projects at the moment, including building the commemorative board. Make it a give-away? Maybe. I stroked into my first wave and gave it no more thought. They weren't great waves but any day with surf beats any day without it. "It's mighty cold for surfing, isn't it, Ted?" came a voice as I showered off. I think the water streaming from the shower there on the boardwalk was even colder than the Atlantic I had just left. "And you out riding around in shorts, Jim?" I asked, turning to face Jaime Trejo, bicycle cop, and his partner. "Hey, Dave, they have you back on wheels?" I shook the water off and carried my board toward the truck. They followed behind me, pushing their mountain bikes. "Now and again," replied Officer David Blake. "Johnson is under the weather." "Flu," added Trejo. Both policemen wore bike shorts but were also encased in parkas. I was wondering whether to strip off my own wet-suits or drive the six blocks home in them. Simpler to stay wrapped in neoprene, maybe, especially with this wind picking up. Did they want something? Even if we were friends, having a couple cops following me made me a tad nervous. "I'll ride on south," said Jim. "Catch up when you can." He pedaled away, leaving me with Dave. So it was Blake that wanted something. "Um, Ted, the Bells are good friends of yours, right?" "My best friends." What kind of trouble was Rick in now? "Do you —" He looked distinctly embarrassed but blurted it out. "Do you think you could be at their house tomorrow evening? Maybe around Six or so?" "Yeah, I suppose so. Michelle and I go over there a lot. Charlie too. She's best buds with their daughter." "Janice. I know. I asked her out." That was unexpected. And maybe a tad funny. "Ah! And you want me to vouch for your outstanding character." Not that Rick had much need to be protective of his daughter. She was probably the most responsible person in the family. "Something like that. I'm, well, older than the guys their daughter usually dates. I don't know how they might take that." I gave the officer a good looking-over. "You're what, about twenty-five? That's not very old, man, believe me." "Twenty-four, actually, for another month. But still, it is a bit of an age difference, you know?" "Hey, I'll try to be there and give moral support." It wasn't like I had anything else planned. "But maybe you could do something for me, too." I laid out the gist of my conversation with Bill Cotton a couple days earlier. "I consider the chief a friend," I told him. "I don't know if he needs any support in all this, but I'd appreciate it if you could keep an eye open. Jim, too. Might as well tell him." Dave nodded soberly. "I've noticed some things. Thanks for letting me know what's going on." Then he smiled. "See you tomorrow night!" he called as he pedaled off after his partner. *Chapter 4*; Valentine's Day was coming. I had ignored that holiday for many years. Now things were different. Maybe it would be a good time to ask Michelle to marry me, I thought, as I sat waiting for her in the kitchen. Or would it be too soon? I really considered us married already, 'in the eyes of God and Nature,' from the moment we had agreed to be together, just as I had considered Michelle to be divorced from the late Bradley Jackson as soon as both had agreed to sign the papers. Legality lags behind reality, at times. So, even if our partnership wasn't legally recognized, I reckon if two people agree to live together as man and wife, it is a marriage. The government has nothing to do with that. But as with any other sort of partnership, a legal contract is a sound idea. It's just good business to have something in writing. That's what civil marriage provides. In fact, we could marry in the Church. With her former husband deceased, there was no longer any divorced status to get in the way of that. Both her former husbands. I assumed she had been married to Charlie's father, not that it mattered one

way or the other. Hmm, I hoped she wouldn't be expecting a ring. That wasn't going to happen. Was this evening going to happen? "Ready to go?" I called. Michelle yelled something back from the bathroom. As the door remained closed, I guessed she wasn't. Across the table from me, Charlie was vigorously erasing something in her sketch book. "Sure you don't want to come with us?" I asked. "Hey, I know you two go over there to drink instead of doing it in front of me. I'll stay out of your way tonight." She put down her drawing and pushed back her thick shag. It had returned to being black now. From what I had learned of Charlie, that could change to any shade, at any time. "Anyway, Jan has a date tonight so I can't hang with her." I only nodded. No need to comment on that. "Hey, John says the surf shop downtown is closing," she told me. "You expected that, didn't you?" I shrugged. "It's happened to every other competitor over the past ten years. People jump in without realizing what's involved." Charlie snickered. "I think you just did that with Mom." I couldn't help but agree. A few minutes later Michelle and I were cutting across the backyard of the vacant house next door, on our way to the Bells. It was good to see that it was being kept mowed now, not that a lot of that was needed this time of year. "I really am thinking of trying to buy this place," I said. Michelle turned her gaze toward the house for a moment. "If I get a decent job, maybe we could swing it." I knew that was true. "I wouldn't make an offer right now. Best to wait until the season winds down." We stepped into the Bells's back yard. A bark — there was Kay, with both their dogs on leashes. "If the Bells can always have a dog or two around, maybe Charlie could too," I mused. "We know you don't really want one, Ted Carrol. Just having the two of us around is asking a lot of you. Hi, Kay!" "Go on in," came the response. "We still have unfinished business out here." Jan opened the back door, the door into the kitchen, to us. I think she was expecting someone else. "A dress?" asked Michelle. "This must be a serious date!" "Even surfer girls dress up sometimes," I told her. "You look good, young lady." "Thanks, Shaper." She looked out into the dark and then shut the door behind us. The Richard Bells, senior and junior, were clearing the table. Dinner was apparently just over. "Hey, guys," I greeted them. "Help yourself from the fridge," said Rick. "Some of the stuff in there is yours, isn't it?" It was, indeed. If I couldn't have wine in my own house the next best thing was to stash it at the neighbors' place.

Surf shop owner Ted Carrol was happy, perhaps for the first time in his life. It was time for him to settle back into a quiet existence in Cully Beach, now with the woman he loved beside him. It was not going to happen. Someone had framed his friend, Chief of Police Bill Cotton. There were rumors of corruption in city hall. A mysterious developer had plans for his sleepy neighborhood. And an old flame chose just that time to come back into his life. Once again, surf, suspense, and self-doubt combine as Ted solves the riddles of the present and of his own dark past, in the follow-up to *Shaper*; *Waves*; a novel by Stephen Brooke

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