

CHAPTER ONE

SAND CRAB

I'd positively lusted for a West Virginia spring morning during the three hundred plus mornings my Fast Patrol Boat muttered, sometimes roared, through mist-shrouded Vietnamese rivers. Vietnam wasn't the only place my lust had surfaced. Boyhood vision of breeze-soft mornings sometimes came to mind, regardless of endeavor: sailing the world's seas, showing the flag, pulling liberty in foreign ports, exercising at general quarters and a host of other times and places. The glory of spring in the mountains of West Virginia hovered even on the perimeter of pain killer in San Diego Naval Hospital after folks trying to break my stuff scored a bull's eye.

I had it all now, including the spring morning I'd longed for, but I wasn't no where near a satisfied kitty cat. I pondered on this strange dilemma at length while lounging in an old cane bottomed rocker on the porch of my farmhouse, watching wind blown clouds obscure the top of Berkeley's Knob, then lay racing shadows across the big meadow in front of the house.

I was cognizant of a sea bag full of reasons why I should have felt carefree as a young sailor in London with a thirty-day leave chit and a pocket full of Yankee Green Dollars. I was newly retired from the United States Navy. I could buy my family a pretty without straining my piggy bank when the mood came upon me. I was in no way rich, but I had enough stashed away that I wouldn't need to visit blood banks in the foreseeable future. I had freehold farms with both hillside and bottom land, which required no effort on my part to produce a profit. I had a gaggle of friends across the world I could count on for any sort of hook-up I might need. I had a crazy bulldog and a smart Persian cat. Best of all I had my wife, Patty and my son, Joe-Joe.

Legend has it that all good sailors go to Fiddler's Green when they die, a place of wine, women and song. Their journey entails bribing Charon to row them across the River Styx so they can enter the Land of the Dead in which Fiddler's Green is located. Getting to Fiddler's Green was not a concern of mine; I found my own Fiddler's Green right here on earth.

Still, I was not happy.

Acute mental discontent deemed it time for a little morale building. I heaved my carcass out of the chair, descended the age-worn, stone porch steps and ambled across the clipped orchard grass to where Patty and Joe-Joe were investigating forthcoming arrival of the Easter

Bunny.

I grabbed Patty, swung her tiny body into the air and kissed on her until she kicked her heels behind her, squealed and blushed.

"Do me, Daddy! Do me!" Joe-Joe yelled, exhibiting the jealousy of a near four-year old left out of a little mom and pop rubbing and purring. I complied by slowly swinging him through arm-length circles. When I had him wound up, I set him on the lawn and watched him reel rubber-legged across the soft grass. Patty and I laughed at his dizzy wanderings until he finally landed on his stern with a solid plop right at my feet.

"Hey, Joe-Joe, any sign of that old bunny yet?" I asked, pulling him upright and hugging him against my legs.

He made fast to my hand and took me under tow to a clump of Easter lilies growing beside an old, gnarled maple. "Look, Daddy. Mommy says he comed early so he can finded me Easter morning." Joe-Joe cried, pointing to a trail of rabbit pellets.

"He's been doing his recon alright." I agreed, grinning at Joe-Joe's misuse of verb tenses, something of which he was totally oblivious. Switching between English and Italian at a tender age had fouled him up, language wise.

"What is recon, Daddy?"

"Recon is short for reconnaissance,. The word means to look over an area to see what is going on. That's what the bunny did. That old rabbit sneaked around real quiet to make sure he can get in and out of our house on Easter Sunday. He did the very same thing at the very same tree when I was your age and that dumb bunny still can't remember how to get inside the house!"

"Easter bunny is not either dumb! He finded me here. My 'nother house is in Italia."

"That makes sense, Joe-Joe. I forgot he visited you in Italy last Easter, so he isn't dumb. He's smart to know you're now in West Virginia.

"Look, I appointed you chief master-at-arms so you'd keep Jarhead from going AWOL and tearing up the countryside. Don't you think it's about time you held muster on him? Check on Blue Suit too, although he is probably watching the morning news programs."

Our bulldog and cat were somewhat up in years and no longer too interested in raising hate and discontent as they had when we'd lived on the farm some years before. I figured Jarhead's advancing age caused anguish and heartbreak among dozens of adoring gyps that experienced loneliness during his lengthy stay in Europe. I didn't wish old Jarhead and his canine lady friends bad luck, but absence of an ever spiraling puppy population would stave off repeats of screaming and gnashing of teeth by neighbors, such as we experienced before we transferred first to Spain, then to Italy.

There was likely sighs of relief among males of various species when The Word circulated that The Terrors of Big Otter County had reached senior citizen status during their overseas sojourn. That freed male animals in the area from heavy intimidation and sheer violence, sometimes inflicted by both neighborhood scourges at the same time. Crossed Paws, one for all -- and all for one, was their motto.

With Joe-Joe out of the immediate vicinity, I took advantage of the situation and grappled onto Patty. Her lips were as soft and her tiny body as firm as the Sunday afternoon she'd first

kissed me, a grand occurrence that happened a week after I met her. Her first kiss, that would have caused a monk to suit up and head for the nearest body exchange, wasn't totally gratis. Patty owed me Big Time for tricking me into accompanying her to church that morning and, later the same day, for engineering hostile discharge of my services by a perfectly good mistress.

"Clay-honey," Patty gasp, when I finally turned her loose. "You always make me think *Things*. I am thinking them now, but leaving Joe-Joe outside to play is not possible. He would soon realize we were engaging in something interesting and tear into our bedroom."

"Well, there's a sure-fire way around the little devil. We'll knock him out with a slug of wine at lunch."

"Clay!"

"That menace to our love life started pinching sips of wine in Italy and you know it. It never hurt him, just like it doesn't hurt European kids and they pour the stuff down -- every meal."

"I realize Europeans believe wine beneficial for children, Clay-honey, but I do not favor it. Joe-Joe is much too young for wine -- or beer."

"He doesn't think so. I caught him sucking the dregs out of my beer bottle last evening and that was probably not all he drank. I suspect he sneaked behind my chair and lashed himself firmly to the neck of the bottle, like every time I took a drink and set it back on the end table. He looked as happy as a possum in poke berry time."

"I suspect he was!" Patty threw up her hands. "Like father -- like son. Apples do not fall far from the tree, excreta, excreta."

"Well, maybe, but kids exposed to booze when they're little shavers are not likely to find it new and interesting when they're teenagers. Look at the Europeans. How many booze hounds did you see over there? Very few, compared to the United States where we try to keep booze far from kids. European kids get wine in their pacifiers. Makes 'em sleep good, so they say."

"It is a different culture, dearest.

"Speaking of sleeping, Clay-honey, you again tossed and turned all night. You mumbled in your sleep, which you do only when troubled. Is something bothering you?"

"Only that I can't talk you into putting your little boon-dockers under my bed, so I can get my paws on your teacups."

Patty reddened nicely. It was a continuing source of wonder that, after six plus years of enthusiastic lovemaking, she never failed to blush at the slightest sexual innuendo.

She leaned her wavy-curly, taffy haired head against my breast bone, -- as high as she could get without shifting into tippy-toe mode. "You are being foolish. You never *ever* have to persuade me. When we first . . . er, married I wanted you every darn time you smiled at me, or touched me. By damn-in-hell, I still do! Most women are not so blessed. Some are actually happy their husbands no longer desire them. I do not understand married women who do not enjoy making love, but I think --"

Patty's ability to explain her thoughts in a few sentences was non-existent. Detailed explaining, coupled with her usually speaking without contractions, was a trait that drove a lot of

folks, including me, off-plumb. I learned, early in our relationship, how to knock that off smartly -- so I did.

"You better stop kissing me, Clay-honey, or I will have to take Joe-Joe to Mommy. She will start wondering if I do so too often."

"She never wondered why you spent entire weekends at folk festivals, fairs and such after we . . . er, got engaged."

"*Clay!*" Big blush that time. A big giggle too. "Oh, Mommy knew! She did not take me to task for our pre-marital escapades only because my total change of character confused her so badly she simply could not decide *what* to do. Daddy was the one who never suspected. Otherwise, dearest, you would have suffered the indignity of a black snake whipping, followed by an immediate shotgun wedding."

"Did you decide about letting Joe-Joe stay with your folks a couple of days per week? You know you'll have to surrender to them sooner or later."

"Their arguments are strong, but I dislike having him away. What do you think, dearest?"

"Let him go. I don't remember my own grandparents. He's not going to have his forever. He'll have a fine time and learn something too. Hanging with your dad, watching him mess with farm machinery and trade cattle and stuff can't hurt him. It'd be good for him to learn to dicker like your dad. A good trader can always make a buck. Your mother will keep him well-fed. Let him stay with your folks from Saturday until Monday morning. We'll see him at church and dinner at your folks place, then come home and revert to our old, loose ways like we used to do on Sunday afternoons before he arrived on the scene."

That generated yet another big blush.

We wandered the yard arm-in-arm until we noticed Joe-Joe, Jarhead and Blue Suit had latched onto Mister Pollard, our farm manager, who was en route to salt the livestock in the pasture below us. We made our break and slipped through the white picket gate into the orchard.

"Clay-honey, something is *bothering* you." Patty persisted, as she always did when she angled for information. "Maybe you should not have retired from the Navy. Sorry, I meant entered the Fleet Reserve. That is correct, you know. One does not actually retire until one has a total of thirty years of active duty, or a combination of at least twenty years active and the remainder in the Fleet Reserve. One is subject to recall from the Fleet Reserve until reaching the thirty year anniversary at which time one is fully retired under a United States Code."

Shortly after we had gotten engaged, or whatever she had hooked me into doing, Patty ordered a sea bag full of books from the *Navy Institute* and boned up mightily on the Navy. Her ability to comprehend and retain volumes of information, seemingly without effort, amazed me. I chalked that up to her genius level IQ.

"It makes no difference. We get the same money whether it's called retainer or retired pay. I'm glad we have it, but it seems a lot for so little, considering how much the Navy gave me."

"Silly! You earned both your salary and retainer pay many times over. I get chills when I think you might have died from wounds before I even *met* you. Elizabeth says she experiences a similar sensation when she sees Gunny without clothing. She says he has been wounded so

many times his body resembles a freckled blanket with puckers and zippers! So, tell me -- are you having reservations about leaving the Navy?"

I had known for a long while that Patty and Elizabeth, county sheriff and wife of Gunnery Sergeant Ronald D. Thorton, USMC, my best running mate from the time I was a young second class petty officer, were sisters in everything but fact. They apparently shared intimate secrets with ease, sometimes to the detriment of Gunny or me, or both.

I had learned another thing about Patty early-on. There was no way I could lie to her or fool her to get the bit out of her teeth when she wanted an answer. Once she puffed out her lower lip and went into her stubborn mode, it was time to furl my Flag. I chalked that up to her being a regulation schoolteacher before she chucked that job to run the world with me.

"It's not leaving the Navy. Yeah, I miss it like a newly homeless sooner dog misses biscuits, but it was time to go. It's not my Navy now. I'm not into the social engineering business."

"Something is bothering you. Clay-honey, do not close me out of your thinking, Please."

"I've been out of the Navy almost two weeks and, basically, I am going flat out of my skull! I can't stay interested in anything, even things I waited so long to do. I wake up thinking I ought to be doing something. I have to find something interesting to do!"

"You have lots to do! You could learn to manage our holdings. Mister Pollard is aging and will some day wish to retire as farm manager. He would welcome you doing that. Daddy will some day expect us to manage his holdings too. You in no way need a job. Think about it, Clay-honey. With our interest income, the farm profit, your retainer and other odds and ends, we will not need to touch our ever increasing principal.

"Dearest, I do not *want* you to have a job that would cause separation. We have been separated quite enough already! Being together is ever so much better than what we experienced in the Sixth Fleet, although we were not separated as much as most Navy couples. You should consider our being together during the day has benefits. For example, when Joe-Joe enters kindergarten, you could play with my tea cups at any time you wish!" Patty explained, turning the shade of a ripe cherry.

I folded her into my arms and kissed her sun-streaked hair, then her slightly pug nose. "I'm not a farmer, Kitten. I don't know beans about farming, nor do I care to learn. Mister Pollard is doing fine just as he has before I was born. I'd just get in his way. If he ever tells me he wants to retire, I intend to let him pick and train his relief.

"Patty, I feel useless without a job. I've got to find something that'll keep me interested. Damned quick too, or you'll have to check me into a room with soft, pink bulkheads and heavy locks on the hatches!

"I can't say I'm overjoyed at being something akin to a Sand Crab, which is, as you probably know, a Mark One - Mod Zero shipyard worker or government worker – and, loosely, a regulation civilian."

Patty giggled against my chest. "You're not fooling me. My big, bad master chief wants subordinates to boss around and some crippled kitty type people to care for. You will find the employment you seek. You can do lots!"

"Like there are civilian billets for people who know how to devise plans to break things lurking behind every tree in these hills." I grumbled. "I don't want anything in selling. I disliked that when I was on recruiting, trying to sell a lifestyle. The only good thing that happened in recruiting was I met you."

"Baloney! Clay-honey, think of the success you enjoyed and the friends you made during your recruiting tour. Your subordinates both liked and respected you. Your people were not only your recruiters, they were your friends!" She giggled again. "It must be your ability to influence unsuspecting beings to proceed exactly on the course you set and make them believe they enjoy doing it. You certainly did that to me. To use one of your lovely expressions, 'I fell from grace like a big dog!'"

"Liar, Liar -- pants on fire! I had no intention of marrying anybody, certainly not a girl twelve years younger. Not until you destroyed my love life in two states by lying to God-World about how I had to marry some young girl I got pregnant when I hadn't even so much as touched your interesting parts. After your college buddies spread that word around, I couldn't have bought a date! Then, when I was so confused I didn't know whether to dance or draw small stores, you seduced me and led me straight down the primrose path to formation steaming! You know this is A-number-one-ditty-bag true too."

"Patty turned a scorcher. It was not *quite* that way at all!"

"Close enough for government work, Kitten. Anyway, Monday morning, as the sun crosses Berkeley's Knob and lights that meadow right there, I go in search of gainful employment. Something independent so I can make it home before the kid gets sprung from school and can play with your tea cups and other parts that might interest me."

Shortly after I met Patty, I had drunkenly told my running mate, Gunny Thorton, that Patty's breasts appeared no larger than a shot glass or tea cup. Patty learned of this statement months later from Gunny's wife and started jokingly referring to her breasts as 'tea cups.' That was what we called them thereafter.

"Oh, you will surely find what you want, darling -- both at home and in the world of civilian employment. Of that, I have no doubt. I am, of course, extremely biased. I do have *certain* concrete reasons for believing you are so wonderful."

Cute giggle that girl. Nice blush too.

"Yeah, sure . . . everyone is just dying to hire a dumb hill-billy sailor who knows how to devise communications needed to coordinate destroying huge areas of terrain."

"*Henry Clay Berkeley!* You are *infuriating!* I have repeatedly asked you not to refer to yourself in such a manner. You are the most intelligent man I know and the nicest one too! Admiral Grayson, himself, told me you were a fine planner and the best communicator in the fleet. He said it was a terrible shame you refused to accept a commission. So there!"

Patty never nagged and rarely complained, but she lost the bitter end every single time I made some off-handed remark concerning my lack of mental agility. I chalked that up to some weird reaction to my being dumber than a nine pound rock, compared to her.

It mystified me why so many people considered me highly intelligent. Few other men were dumb enough to spend eleventy-eleven years racking up off-duty college credits that didn't mesh to anything, certainly not the history degree I'd aimed for. I finally had to settle for a

cobbled together degree in Human Resources. I wouldn't have gotten that degree if Patty hadn't pushed me to take the boring courses I lacked: Tumble Bug Watching, Gravel Grading, Advanced Rope Platting, Newt Growing . . . whatever.

"Ah, forget the damned job for now. Let's discuss something really important. What time are you going to heave the Duty Rug Rat in bed for his nap?"

"Clay, I rarely attempt to advise you, but I am going to do so now. Sir, get your mind off my *cute* overbite and my *lovely* tea cups and turn your thoughts toward building a resume! I am certain an interesting position, other than in bed, is waiting for you!"

Little did she know how true that would turn out.