

Steven Becker

TUNA TANGO



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By
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Chapter 1

Will looked out over the bay, pulled the five-pound anchor from the cooler behind him and dropped it into the water so as not to upset the balance of the stand-up paddle board. “Here.” He tossed a line to Sheryl, paddling next to him. She caught it and tied a half-hitch to the crate strapped to the front of her board. Connected, the couple exchanged smiles.

“So far so good,” she said as she reached for the spinning rod and picked it out of the foot-long length of PVC pipe strapped to the crate. Will had already rigged an artificial shrimp to the end of the line, with several small split-shot weights several feet above.

“Right there.” He pointed. “The oyster bar goes to sand along that line.” He made a motion with his hand, showing the direction of the bar so that she knew where to cast. The murky bay waters were a challenge for sight fishing. After spending the last fifteen years tossing flies into the crystal clear waters of the Keys, fishing Tampa Bay would have been a letdown for most, but despite its congestion, the bay offered great fishing. And that made it worthwhile.

She cast the lure to the spot he had pointed to, let the small weight take it to the bottom, and closed the bail. “Now what?”

“Just bring it in a little at a time. Jiggle the rod to give it some life. You should have a hit shortly.”

He had been careful when planning this outing, because it was actually more of a business presentation than a fishing trip. Her buy-in to his latest idea was essential. The hurricane that had torn through the lower Keys the summer before had wiped him out, and his only assets—a flats boat and an unfinished house—both uninsured, were lost to the storm. The boat taken to sea with the storm surge, the house ruined beyond his means to repair it.

Sheryl, on the other hand, had struggled to find work after losing her job at the building department—something he felt was largely his fault for recruiting her to help in stopping a crooked real estate deal. They had since been living together in his half-finished house to save money, but with the house in ruins and no income, they’d been forced to make the hard decision and move to Tampa. He’d had a reputation both as a fishing guide and a craftsman; someone who could handle the unusual, and one of his regular bonefish clients had offered him a job rebuilding an old fish house on the intracoastal waterway near St. Petersburg.

Before the storm, Sheryl had been excited to get out of the Keys and maybe go back to school. She had talked endlessly about being bottled up in the Keys. So this had seemed like the perfect answer - at least for her. He missed the Keys.

Moving to the real world was a little too close to reality for his hermit-like fishing guide lifestyle, but he had no choice. The construction job was enough to get him back on his feet, though fishing was never far from his thoughts. He had done his homework and realized there was an opportunity in the rich waters of Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, but without the money to buy a boat, he needed another angle, and hoped paddle board fishing was going to be it. But first he needed her approval or at least acceptance of the idea.

"It's a little shaky. Do you think people can really do this?" she said as a wake from a distant boat passed underneath their boards.

He knew it was a major obstacle, but with the popularity of kayak fishing, this was sure to be the next big thing. The board, although not as stable as a kayak, offered the angler the freedom to move around and the vantage point of being above the water.

"These are stock boards," he said. "The ones I want to get are wider and more stable."

"OK, so, Mr. Hot fishing guide, put me on a fish."

Will scanned the water for any indication that fish were feeding. A tail broke the surface of the five-foot-deep water and he pointed. "There. See it?"

She reeled her line in, adjusted her body, and cast a couple of feet in front of the tailing redfish, clicked the bail closed after the line sank, and started twitching the rod tip, reeling a little line each time. Suddenly the water exploded with a crash as the fish took the lure.

"Nice job! Now, hold the rod high and let it take some line. Maybe tighten the drag a hair."

The fish started its run, pulling line from the reel, and Sheryl gently turned the knob to increase the tension on the line. The fish slowed, tired by the drag, and she began to pump the rod as she took back the line.

"Easy now, no herky jerky. He's going to make another run, just be ready and let him go," he said and watched the battle. It was almost as rewarding to coach an angler as it was to make the catch himself. "There, he turned his head. Get ready."

She held the rod high again, as he had taught her, letting it bend deeply to take the strain off the line. This run was shorter than the last, and soon she was gaining the line back. "I can see him!"

Will looked at her rod and saw the leader about to enter the rod tip. He went to his knees, pulled the line joining the boards to bring him closer, and reached out for the fishing line, grabbing it and lifting the fish toward the boat.

The redfish glistened in the sun as he reached with his other hand, opened the cooler lid, and gently laid the flapping fish inside the box.

"Nice work." He went to high-five her, but she lost her balance, having to go onto her knees before she fell into the water.

Will untied the boards and lifted the anchor. They paddled the half-mile toward the Gandy Bridge, aiming for a small beach where they had put in. He landed first, pulled his board so the fin stuck in the sand, and went to help her.

One at a time he rolled the boards in the water to remove the sand and carried them to the gravel lot. Boards loaded and gear stowed, they pulled two chairs from the back of the truck and carried them to the small beach where they sat down. There was something special about sunsets on Florida's west coast, he thought as they watched the sun start to blend with the horizon. He opened a bottle of wine and poured each of them a glass.

She was quiet—not a good sign. This was his last chance to sell her on a fishing gig. He was committed to the construction project, but knew that was a short term plan, not his future. He needed to get her agreement, though.

“OK. I know you want to talk, so here’s what I’m seeing. I love you, and don’t want to cut you at the knees every time you come up with a plan, but ...”

His heart sank, even though he’d been prepared for the denial. It was a risk, and one he would have taken had he been single. With enough money for a couple of boards and a used van, he would have no problem living the nomadic life for a while, but that wasn’t for her. And his life had been so much richer since they met. He gazed at her crystal green eyes, which always reminded him of the clear water of the Keys.

“I know it’s a stretch but ...”

She took his hand. “I know it’s your dream, and I’m not going to shut you down entirely. How about if you do it nights and weekends for a while, and see how it works?”

Although he knew she thought this was being generous, what she failed to say lay implied like a blanket over him. Nights and weekends meant he would have to take the construction job. With no other choice, though, he agreed. “I’m taking Lance from the fish house out tomorrow. He’s been after me to look at that fish house of his. I’ll finalize our deal.” He put his head down, even though he had expected this outcome.

When she leaned over and kissed him, it felt more like a dog being patted on the head for obeying a command than a display of affection

The two men paddled the intracoastal waterway through Pass-A-Grille, a small community south of the more well known St Petersburg Beach. They had already hooked a pair of barracuda that were on their way out to the larger gulf to spawn, but were in search of the more elusive snook, rumored to be in the waterway. Trolling may not be the best way to hook one, but Will had made the call due to the wind.

They’d put in five miles to the north and passed several communities with large houses and docks on the water, interlaced with small restaurants and bars, on their downwind drift to the end of Pass-A-Grille beach. Under better circumstances, he would have stayed in this area, casting at the numerous docks and piles that provided cover for the fish, but the wind made that impossible. In fishing, as in life, one had to be versatile.

That wasn’t working so well in his personal life either, but he tried to put that out of his mind as the other man’s rod bent over.

“Got one!” Will called over to him.

Lance went to his knees and removed the rod from the holder set in a pipe in the crate in front of him. He was an experienced angler, looking to board fishing as a challenge and a way to get into areas that were inaccessible by boat. He quickly had the fish next to the board and his free hand automatically moved to his side for the pliers sheathed on his belt. Reaching over the board, he grabbed the hook and shook the fish free.

“Another ‘cuda.” He sighed. “Can’t grab a snook.”

The loud music and roar of engines alerted Will to the boat just before its wake hit them. A moment later, a thirty-foot fishing boat settled into the water beside them. He looked the boat over, thinking it was an unusual mixture of form and function. Where one would expect a center console with a T-top, a small enclosed cabin sat in its place, large enough for two men to get out of the weather. The narrow beamed hull, powered by twin 275 HP engines, was a powerful mixture.

He thought it just another obnoxious tourist, but Lance seemed to know the man behind the wheel. They continued to paddle, but the boat kept pace with them until the music cut off and the man behind the wheel yelled over the sound of his engine.

“Yo, Baitman! You got a line on fixing that old building? Just say the word and I’ll get it done for you. Season’s almost here and it’s looking like it’s about to fall in the water.”

They were in an area where the intracoastal fanned out with houses on the Eastern side and marinas and restaurants on the West. Will followed Lance’s gaze as he looked at the old building. “No way. It needs to be done right, not your way.”

“You never know. One storm and it could be gone tomorrow, and the big boys are starting to run out there!” the man yelled. He punched the throttle and drove off.

Just as they regained their balance from the initial wake, it was redirected by the seawall and made its return.

“Can we stop here for a minute? There’s an empty slip.” Lance went to his knees and pointed toward a small marina .

“Sure.” Will guided his board to the empty dock, set his butt on the warm wood, and swung his feet onto the dock. He quickly looped the board’s leash around a cleat, securing it, and went to help Lance.

They sat side by side on the dock drinking a beer from the cooler. “You want to tell me what that was about?” Will asked.

“That building,” The man pointed to a decrepit fish house almost entirely built out over the water. “It’s a unique spot. They won’t let you build structures out over the water like that anymore. That’s the job I called you for.”

Will had wondered when he was going to get around to this. Sure, Lance was an avid fisherman, but he was also a businessman. Sooner or later he was bound to get around to the work he had been after him to do. He evaluated the building with a carpenter’s eye, wishing he didn’t have eyeballs calibrated from years of experience as he surveyed it. Nothing was plumb or square, and the building dipped toward the water. The old metal siding was hanging on by the remains of long rusted nails, and the old galvanized metal roof was badly rusted. The interior was open to the elements, the windows long removed.

“Doesn’t look too good.”

“I want you to have an open mind here.” Lance paused and drank a long sip of his beer. “I know you need some work, and I think this building is your answer. There’s no one else I know that has your skill-set.”

Will thought he had reached the bottom just having to consider a real job, but looking at the building, he realized he’d misjudged how far he could fall. “That thing needs to be torn down.”

“I’d be right there with you ... but I can’t. That building has been in my family for several generations. Look around; there’s nothing built over the water like that anymore. The Army Corp of Engineers and the city planners won’t let it happen. The only way I can use that building is to rebuild it like it is. And where it is.” He paused. “I’m looking to move the fish business over here. We’re by the railroad tracks now; used to work back in the day when everything went by train, but these days it’s all air freight. The neighborhoods run down and after the bubble burst a few years ago, the buildings not worth half what I refinanced it for.”

Will looked at him skeptically. “Rebuild it? That thing looks like a good blow would take it into the water.”

“It’s been through a few of those, but I had a marine engineer look at it, and he thinks it’s doable. I just need the right person. Someone open minded and creative.” He patted Will on the back.

Will looked at the building again with fresh eyes, now that it was all out in the open. It would be a challenge, and if he had to get a job, he might as well be his own boss. Besides, working on the water, across from Pass-A-Grille beach and on the intracoastal, wasn't a bad location.

The man must have seen his interest. "It's yours. No bids, no budgets. Just keep it moving. I'll give you free rein to do the work as you see fit."

Will looked at the man. This kind of offer from almost anyone else would have pegged his bullshit meter into the red, but he'd know Lance for years. If a man's character was represented in the way he fished, Lance was to be trusted. "Sounds good. What about plans and permits?" He hesitated, hating to talk money. "And you know I'm pretty broke right now. I can't finance this and bill you. I need the money up front."

"Will." He looked at him. "You make this work, I'll pay you cash. As far as permits, I'll leave that up to you, but you've got to know that people are going to be watching this job, and not all of them are going to like it. There's a bunch of people here that don't want this to go forward; some want it torn down, and others are looking to buy it for themselves. So you're going to have to watch your back."

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER



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