

WICKED BREAK

by Jeff Shelby

CHAPTER ONE

The man on the shore was waiting for me.

I'd been in the water for an hour, catching a nice southern break that was producing tight swells of about three to four feet just north of the jetty in Mission Beach. He'd been there for about half that time, watching from a distance, and when I dug the nose of my six foot Ron Jon into the face of an anxiety free wave and went ass over kettle into the water, the distraction of being watched ended my session.

I trudged in, shaking the ocean out of my hair as I approached the shoreline. The beach was deserted on a cloudy Monday at mid-morning. When the man waved at me, I knew he wasn't trying to get anyone's attention but mine.

"Are you Noah?" he asked. "Noah Braddock?"

I ran a hand over my face, sliding away the excess water and not bothering to disguise a frown. I jammed the butt of the board into the sand and let it stand erect. "Yeah. Who are you?"

"I'm Peter Pluto," he said. "I need your help. I need you to find my brother." He gestured behind him. "The guy at your place said you were out here. Your roommate, I assumed."

Carter was not my roommate, but inhabited my place nearly as much as I did.

I studied Peter Pluto. He wore blue jeans and a brown sweatshirt with old running shoes. His thinning, dark hair was trimmed short and the lines in his face told me he hadn't slept much recently.

I bent down and undid the velcro leash around my right ankle. "That right?"

"You are an investigator, aren't you?" he asked, squatting down a little, trying to get even with my face.

I stood back up. "Yeah, I am. But I'm not doing a whole lot of work right now."

"I'll make it worth your while," Peter Pluto said. "Cash up front."

"It's not about the money, Mr. Pluto," I said. "I'm just not looking for work at the moment. Other things going on, you know?"

“Peter. Call me Peter.” He blinked a couple of times and, for a moment, I thought he might cry. But he shifted his eyes and sighed. “I guess Mike Berkley was wrong.”

I looked at him, surprised. “You know Berk?”

Pluto nodded. “Yeah. He handled my mother’s estate when she died. That’s how I got your name. Said you’d be able to help me.”

Mike Berkley was an attorney who had thrown me some work when I first started out as an investigator. I was having a hard time paying the bills and he’d come thru with some simple stuff that had kept me out of complete poverty. Berk had become a friend and I didn’t think that he would’ve offered my name without reason.

“Tell me about your brother,” I said, pulling my rashguard up over my head.

Pluto looked at me cautiously for a moment, perhaps wondering if I was serious. He relaxed when he saw that I was.

“His name is Linc and he’s nineteen,” Pluto said. “He’s been gone for at least a couple of days.”

“Have you gone to the police?”

He hesitated, something crossing in his eyes that I couldn’t read.

“I don’t think the police will do anything,” he said. “He’s legal and he’s run away before.”

“Run away?”

Pluto nodded. “About four years ago. Before our mom passed away. She had cancer and it was tough on him.”

“Where were you?”

He shifted uncomfortably, kicking his right shoe into the sand. “Basically, I’d left him there. It was tough on me, too. I was going to school up at UCLA. I didn’t make it home very often, I guess.”

I nodded. “So where is he living now?”

“Up in the college area,” he said, referring to the neighborhoods around San Diego State. “When Mom died two years ago, he was emancipated and has lived on his own since.”

“How come not with you? Or your father?”

A small wave of anger spread across his face. "We didn't really have a dad."

I knew the feeling. I didn't push it.

"As for why Linc didn't live with me—well, he hates me." Peter Pluto gave a half-smile, sadness and shame creeping into his eyes. "Blames me for not sticking around and leaving him with her. When she died, I tried to get him to come live with me. But he wouldn't do it. There was a small trust from our grandparents. He's managed to make it last for a while. Won't take my help."

“But now you want to help.”

He nodded. “I check up on him once a week. Knock on his door, he tells me to fuck off, at least I know he's alright. I went there Friday and no one answered. Tried Saturday and yesterday. Nothing.”

“How do you know he didn't just take off for a few days?” I asked. “A little vacation or something.”

Pluto shook his head sternly. “That's not him. He's going to State, majoring in political science. Wants to be an attorney, I guess. Plus, it's almost mid-term time.”

“Mid-terms usually... mean bigger parties at State,” I said, scoffing at the notion that anyone took exams seriously up on Montezuma Mesa.

Pluto shook his head.

“Maybe he needed to blow off a little steam,” I said. “Get away for a day or two.”

“He doesn't do that kind of thing. He's serious about school.”

I thought Peter was kidding himself. San Diego State is the bastard child of San Diego universities. It lacks the private prestige and pricey tuition of USD and doesn't come close to the scientific reputation of UCSD. The students who ended up there did so because they were denied admission to the other two schools or simply because they didn't want their studies to get in the way of partying.

As an undistinguished alum, I knew that from experience.

“Your best bet is still to report it to the police,” I said. “Even if he's run away before, you can file a missing persons report. I can give you the name of someone who will listen to you and take you seriously.”

Whatever had crossed his eyes before when I'd mentioned the police was back.

"I can't go to the police," he said.

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I went into his apartment, okay? I talked the super into letting me in yesterday because I was worried." He stopped, his face tightening. "And I found something."

I didn't say anything.

"There were guns in his dresser," Peter Pluto finally said. "A ton of them. I don't know anything about guns, but there were some that looked like handguns and some that looked like things I've seen in movies. Automatics, maybe, like machine guns. I freaked out and left."

I flicked a bead of water off my arm. Peter wasn't doing much to convince me to find his brother. "So he's not totally serious about school, I guess."

He yanked his hands out of his pockets, his face coloring. "He must have gotten hooked up with a bad crowd. Look, he's had a tough time with everything that's happened." The color receded from his face and a look of utter frustration and concern replaced it. "If he needs help, I want to help him. But I don't want him to go to jail." He stared at me with desperate eyes. "Mike said you could help. Can you?"

I gazed at Peter Pluto for a moment. The last time I'd gotten involved in a family affair, I'd been shot at, Carter nearly died and I pushed a woman to her death. I didn't want to wade into that kind of mess again.

But I'd lied about not needing work. Truth was, I hadn't seen any good money in awhile. A new Jeep payment and a surf trip to Cabo had eaten quickly through my small savings account. I was going to need to do something soon.

Maybe this wouldn't be so personal, though. Do the work, find the kid, get paid. I didn't know Peter or his brother. I figured my past would have a tough time getting in the middle of this one.

And there was something about standing on a quiet beach under thick gray clouds with a man who clearly cared about his brother that made me vulnerable.

"Give me the address," I said to Peter Pluto.

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