

## Saltwater Cowboys

### Chapter 1

After the siren faded I could hear the gentle noise of breaking surf. The Atlantic Ocean lay just across the street, hidden by the hedges in front of another motel. In the hole between two breakers, a familiar voice called my name.

“Dodge Lawson! What took you so long?”

I recognized Ilse Brunner by the fringe of red hair sticking out from under a baseball cap. Dressed in a stylishly slick nylon sweat suit, she was on one knee at the edge of the Jacuzzi, pouring ice from a bucket into the steaming water. Even in the yellow bug lights she looked good, the lines on her face inscribing a gently worn beauty that made women half her age seem like first drafts.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

“Low tide. We have them twice a day, if you haven’t noticed.”

Ilse had phoned me shortly after ten, and I’d immediately set off in my boat, the *R/V Gannet*. The trip from my dock in Croaker Neck had taken under an hour, but a sand bar at the entrance to the motel’s neglected boat basin forced me to wait for the incoming tide.

“You’re paid to hurry,” she said, still kneeling by the pool.

“Oh, absolutely.” I crouched down beside her. “And I’m only in this for the money.”

Ilse's dark eyes flashed. She started to say something, but caught herself, knowing that it would be a waste of breath. With a shake of her head she went back to pouring ice, and making soothing noises toward the rising steam. When the cloud thinned near the surface I could make out a large, oblong shape afloat in the Jacuzzi.

"It will be all right for you soon," Ilse cooed. "My poor, poor *schatz*." Her slightly accented voice flowed with the lilt of a children's book read aloud.

"What's with the ice?"

"To keep him from cooking, of course."

Through the steam I could see that the rounded shape in the pool was a quarter-ton of prehistoric reptile, a loggerhead turtle the *Gannet* and I would carry back to sea. His reddish-brown shell was about four feet long, and the rust-colored scales on top of his head were the size of slightly irregular playing cards. The prodigious embossing of barnacles on his shell gave the impression of an implacable strength, and I didn't think the animal was in any danger of cooking in a tub of lukewarm water.

But Ilse was cooing to him anyway, offering sympathy in two languages. As president of Tortugas Now! she is usually one of the first on the scene of any turtle stranding. The turtle hotline rings in her restored colonial house in the Beaufort historical district, three bridges and two centuries from the Binnacle Inn and the rest of the Atlantic Beach strip.

By virtue of having a boat with a crane—and knowing Ilse—I landed a contract with Tortugas Now! that pays me to pick up and move sick or stranded turtles. I've picked up most of my passengers in the sound, where boaters see them floating and call the hotline. I've also seen turtles stranded on the beach above the high tide line, where

they can get stuck in a tire rut or a hole dug by some fun-loving tourist kids. In two years of carrying turtles on the *Gannet* I had seen them in some strange places—but I never thought I'd see a loggerhead in a Jacuzzi.

The cops finally took their eyes off the towel-clad young woman long enough to look over at me. Like Ilse, they didn't seem too happy with my tardiness. I asked her about the tall FBI-looking guy.

“He is a National Marine Fisheries policeman.”

“Three dozen turtle rescues, I've never seen one of those before.”

“Well, this stranding is sort of unusual, wouldn't you say?”

Just as I got up and started walking back to the dock the Fisheries enforcer snapped his cell phone shut and started straight over to me with a serious government-issue walk. The jet-black, made-for-walking brogans he wore were shined to military standards. Trailing him was one of the regular beach officers, a guy I recognized from his off-duty job at the fuel dock on Radio Island. He moved with the bored shuffle of a beach-town patrolman all set to deal with a long summer of hassling loitering teenagers.

“This is Ron Gatlin,” he said. The other guy picked it up from there, calling himself “the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Enforcement Special Agent in Charge.” With the slightest of nods in my direction the Black guy pulled his jacket aside to show me a badge hung around his neck, also giving me a glimpse of the holstered automatic clipped onto his belt. He handed me a business card and as I was admiring the amount of type they had managed to squeeze onto it, just for his title, plus two office phone numbers and one for his cell, the Atlantic Beach officer—

Snow, according to his name tag—pointed a warning finger in my direction. A shred of what looked like coleslaw was stuck to the fingernail.

“Walk with me, Lawson,” he growled, and we stepped away from the Jacuzzi. Gatlin looked like he was about to climb all over Snow for talking out of turn, but his cell phone started ringing and he turned around to answer it, rotating his body into that imaginary phone booth stance that habitual cell phone users deploy in a crowd.

“First of all,” Snow said, with a nod in Ilse’s direction, “save that low tide bullshit for the foreigners. And second—”

“Who’s the G-man?” I interrupted.

“The federal pain in my worn-out ass. He’s stationed in Carolina Beach, just happened to be up here inspecting shrimp trawlers. I guess he heard us calling this turtle deal into the Coast Guard on the radio.”

“And the butt-naked suspect?”

“Suspect? Any suspect, it’s the turtle. The girl’s a teacher from Buncombe County. Down here with a busload of kids, learning about Blackbeard the Pirate.”

“Argggghhh, may-tee.” It was a well-worn local joke, spoofing the Blackbeard trade, but his face unfroze into the faintest of cop grins, giving me the opening to ask, “So, who went off in the ambulance?”

“Her fellow field trip chaperone and skinny-dipper, a shop teacher named Earl. Earl has a bad case of bruised nuts.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Turtle surprise,” he said, pointing toward the Jacuzzi.

“Ouch. You saying the guy’s nuts were hurt so bad you had to put him in an ambulance?”

“Asthma. Turtle goosed him and his asthma kicked in. When I got here he was turnin’ blue.”

Snow went on to tell me the whole story. According to the Buncombe teacher, after the kids were asleep the shop teacher Earl showed up at her motel room door carrying a six-pack of Tequiza. The two of them, young and at the beach, consumed four bottles of the tequila-flavored malt beverage, and soon she was giggling in the “courtyard” underneath the motel, watching as Earl stripped and began to lower himself into the bubbling whirlpool.

“Sounds like a love story to me.”

“Naturally,” Snow said, “good-ol’ Earl went in backwards, so he wouldn’t miss his date dropping her own drawers.”

“Naturally,” I agreed. In my mind was a picture of Earl, backing into the jet-powered water, savoring his malt liquor buzz as he watched his fellow chaperone unhook her bra and let it fall to the sandy concrete. The guy must have been very pleased with himself in those few exciting moments that ended when his ass first made contact with the probing overbite of the loggerhead’s prehistoric snout. The poor sap had no idea who was lurking in the froth and steam, so maybe the first nudge only confused him. But there couldn’t have been much room for doubt when the 500-pound turtle brought its bowling-ball head up sharply in the space between Earl’s legs and gave him what nearly turned out to be the last goosing of his life.

“The shop teacher turned blue,” Snow repeated, “and the woman started freaking out, running around naked yelling for somebody to call 9-1-1.”

We both chuckled a little over that, but then Special Agent Gatlin walked up and Snow instantly quit clowning around. “Whoever it was put the turtle in the hot tub just missed a manslaughter charge by this much,” he said, holding his thumb and forefinger up in front of my face.

“Not to mention a blatant violation of the Endangered Species Act,” Gatlin chimed in.

“What makes you think somebody put the turtle there?” I wondered. “Couldn’t it have just wandered in off the beach?”

“The turtle Nazi seems pretty sure about it.” Snow used one of the local nicknames for Ilse Brunner. She had collected her share, and Turtle Nazi was far from the worst. I could see that the agent, a turtle professional himself, didn’t care for the Nazi reference.

“The males don’t beach themselves. ”They’ve got no eggs to lay, so they don’t usually climb up on the beach.”

“Well, y’all are the experts, and I’m just the hired hand.”

“Look.” Snow blew breath in my face that smelled like day-old chum. “I know you live in Croaker Neck, and the saltwater cowboys over there are ill with these turtle people. I figure that if somebody moved this turtle, you might have an idea who it was.”

It was getting late and the bad cop-worse-cop routine was beginning to tire me out. “Are you going to have me keel-hauled?” I asked. “Or should I save the turtle?”

“Go ahead,” Snow said, finally giving up the tough-guy act. “The damn thing probably just wandered in here anyway.”

“God damn these endangered species anyway!” Snow cursed, just as Ilse was walking up to us.

“Threatened,” she corrected him in an even tone.

“What’s that?”

“Loggerheads are a threatened species. The leatherbacks, Kemp’s Ridley, the hawksbill and green turtles are endangered.”

“Well, God damn them all anyway!”

The color rose in Ilse’s face, like she was about to pop a gasket. I’d seen that look many times before. There was no denying that high dudgeon looked good on her.

“Do you always swear at the victim of a crime?” Then she started tearing into poor Snow in a shrill voice just as familiar to me as the soothing tone she’d been using on the turtle. I turned from both of them and walked back to where I’d left the *R/V Gannet* tied up at the Binnacle Inn’s poor excuse for a dock.

The *R/V* designation on my boat means that she is a research vessel, not a recreational vehicle. Years ago my grandfather took the name, *Gannet*, from the elegant black-and-white seabirds that nest in Iceland and winter here on the North Carolina banks. My boat’s color-scheme is essentially the same as the birds’, even though the white may be more of a dull gray, and a greenish growth discolors the black bottom paint below the water line. She’s a wooden boat built in the side yard by one of those home-grown geniuses on Harkers Island. In style she is "vernacular," designed by the

shipwright's eye, wide in the beam, round at the stern, and made entirely of juniper and yellow pine. Just under thirty feet, with the distinctive Core Sounder's round stern and flared bow, she began life as a shrimp trawler, then at some point was converted over to sink netting. The original windlass remains, but my grandfather had her rigged with a davits, a sort of nautical crane to make a functional, if low-budget, research vessel. Granddad taught me how to pilot the *Gannet* when I had to stand on an overturned bucket to see past the top of the wheel.

On my watch, she's never been used for research. In addition to getting paid for rescuing turtles, the *Gannet* and I engage in blue-collar work like building docks, repairing docks, and retrieving mangled docks left in the wake of nor'easters and hurricanes. The turtle work pays best, though. There's never a lack of donations to Tortugas Now!

To get Ilse out of his face, Snow escorted the shaken teacher back to her motel room. When he returned it was time to move the loggerhead. That would require some wading, and soon the cops-but not the Special Agent-were stripping down to their skivvies and bitching a blue streak. The muttering suddenly stopped, though, when Ilse began to take off her clothes. She had a few years on the oldest of the lawmen, but they all went temporarily mute at the unveiling of the sleek turquoise one-piece bathing suit that had been hidden beneath her Nike nylon. With their undivided attention firmly in hand, she slipped into the lukewarm Jacuzzi and took charge.

Working together, the four of them slipped a ballistic-cloth sling under the docile turtle. I boomed the *Gannet's* crane as far as I could and then paid out enough cable to

get a hook connected to the eye of the sling. With Ilse guiding, I worked the control levers to gently lift the turtle out of the hot tub and onto a wheeled cart. From there it was a simple matter to ease him over to the dock and down onto my deck.

Soaked to their waists, the deputies renewed their bitching and went off to wring out their boxers. Gatlin kept busy taking pictures with a small digital camera and making notes in a spiral bound tablet. The super-efficient way he went about his business made me think he had to be new on the job, playing his role with rookie enthusiasm. This mistake-a misunderestimation, as one of our recent Presidents might say-was one I'd soon come to regret.

With me and her precious turtle on board, Ilse untied my dock lines and tossed them on deck. "You be careful," she said, shoving me off. They could call her a foreigner if they wanted, and worse than that, but I knew few people who were better around boats than Ilse. Not too long ago, she would have been eager to follow the dock lines aboard and take the ride with me, out Beaufort Inlet and into the ocean, to the secret spot we'd picked to release the turtles. Now I'd have to make that trip alone, knowing that her words of care were meant more for the *Caretta caretta* on my deck than for me.

"Good night," I called, drifting away from the dock. But she was already beyond hailing distance, gathering up her clothes from the pool apron.

The *Gannet's* Detroit Diesel beat its clanking machine-gun rhythm as we motored up Bogue Sound and into the turning basin at Morehead City. A brightly lit and spotless Japanese freighter was tied up at the state port, taking on a load of wood chips, our state's decidedly low-tech but largest export. It's not the first time North Carolina's forests have

been cut and shipped-British shipyards depended on our naval stores-but Yokohama is a lot farther away than Bristol.

Across the channel from the freighter a rusting Nassau-registered tanker pumped aviation fuel into the tank farm on Radio Island. The jet fuel would travel by truck or barge to the nearby Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, where it would power Harrier jets and F-4s.

Leaving the port, I turned south into the shipping channel and Beaufort Inlet, generally considered the southern boundary of the Outer Banks. At the Fort Macon Coast Guard station my loggerhead buddy and I passed the daunting shape of a cutter preparing to go on patrol. To seaward were only the blinking red and green lights of the channel buoys against the endless black of the Atlantic Ocean at night.

Clear of the bars near the inlet, I turned between two red buoys and headed east-southeast, following a familiar course three miles off Shackleford Banks. The ocean was calm, or “*slick cam*,” as they say. The sturdy *Gannet* barely rolled as a gentle swell passed under her keel.

Other than a few fishermen’s lanterns, the only light source I could see was the revolving beacon of the Cape Lookout light. The first rickety wood-and-brick version had been lit in 1812, but it was too short and its light too weak, and it was replaced in 1859 by the sturdy brick tower, 150 feet tall, that still shines its light as far as 25 miles out to sea. While any school child can name Cape Hatteras, and any movie buff knows Cape Fear, few who haven’t been here are even aware of Cape Lookout’s existence. The early Spanish charts called it Cape Trafalgar, after a point on the coast of Andalusia. When the Italian Giovanni Da Verrazzano got here, on the Feast of the Annunciation in 1524, he

named it Cape Annunciata. Later it became *Promontorium Tremendum*, until more literal-minded English mapmakers substituted Cape Look Out.

Watching the lighthouse blink, I began to wonder who might have put a turtle in the motel Jacuzzi. Threatened or not, there seemed to be plenty of loggerheads in Core Sound and the nearby ocean, so catching one would not have been all that difficult. But keeping it alive, and sneaking it under the motel, would take some doing.

I knew that Ilse was right, there was no way the loggerhead had somehow wandered ashore on its own. And definitely not a male loggerhead, because that would go against Nature, and the sea turtle is one of Nature's favored creatures. They evolved in the Upper Triassic, before the dinosaurs, and they are still with us long after their oversized reptilian cousins departed the scene. Female sea turtles return to their natal beach to lay clutches of eggs, sometimes crawling up onto that singular stretch of sand forty years after leaving it as a hatchling. Turtles who may have wandered a thousand miles across the ocean somehow find the way back, like salmon with hundred-pound shells. Scientists think that they navigate by an internal magnetic compass. Or by smell. Or by the stars.

There's a variety of opinion.

A male sea turtle, on the other hand, stays at sea for life. Nature intends that he cross the beach exactly once, at birth. After mating at sea, the female goes off to find her special beach while the barnacle-encrusted, knot-headed old male spends the rest of his days adrift, eating, drinking, and waiting to mate again. He's got no compass, no ultra-sensitive olfaction, no celestial navigation.

I kept on course until my glowing depth finder showed fifty-five feet and the GPS navigation display showed my latitude as 34-30-and-something North, longitude 76-30-and-change West. As I said, beginnings are arbitrary, and Ilse and I had picked that spot simply because it's where the three-mile limit abruptly stops running parallel to the coast. At that point the line bumps out, further offshore, to make room for the Cape Lookout Shoals. Ilse and I had a history with those shoals, and the limits of international waters.

Feathering the crane controls, I eased the turtle over the side. When I released the sling he swam away strongly, then surfaced once, just off the stern. That turtle could have been a hundred and fifty years old. Older than the lighthouse. Older than Detroit Diesels, Jacuzzis, and Jungle Golf put together.

Old enough, I thought, to know better.