

Samples

“I really must be out of it,” Pete said. “They changed some stuff, I didn’t even notice.”

“Well you were away,” Tammy said.

“Except I’ve been back a week . . . Yeah, this patio furniture is new. I’m thinking those flowering plants weren’t there either, in the big round bowls? And the inside of the pool, the color looks different. More vivid. Is it possible they drained the thing and repainted it? Would that be a major job?”

“Anything’s possible,” Tammy said, “but pools tend to be the same color.”

“Either way,” Pete said, “why don’t you help yourself and go in, before we get started. Then I can size up the contrast too, see if I was mixed up on the repainting.”

“Or not,” Tammy said.

“You even *bring* a bikini? Or that’s not part of the deal today?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I do appreciate you giving me the time though.”

“Of *course* . . . why *wouldn't* I?” Pete said.

Admittedly watching Tammy, his one-time surfing instructor, bob around the apartment complex pool would have been a nice touch. The reason they were here though, Tammy was following up, from when she found out Pete had once been a journalist, on the blog she was developing on women’s surfing.

“Women’s *pro* surfing?” Pete said now. “Or just the generic kind?”

“Yes, I’d like to focus on the professional game, with plenty of linkage to the *everyday* female in the water.”

“You’re losing me already. *What* game?”

“It’s a term. But yes the sport is competitive, often fiercely so.”

“Let me sidetrack you for a second. Does a woman really need to . . . scream out, in competition? Or is that a myth?”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost *me*. You mean after a great ride, in celebration? Before she paddles back out?”

“Forget it,” Pete said. “We were at a tennis event yesterday, me and a few people, we drove out to Indian

Wells--and I've seen it on *TV*, but dang, in the flesh they *really* bellow it out."

"Actually," Tammy said, "I know a little something *about* that. I *played* junior tennis, and our coach, he had ground rules. He felt you were unfairly interfering with your opponent by making the noise."

"Wow. That guy still around? He should get an award or something."

"They ran him off. Some of the parents. They felt he was too dogmatic. Last I heard he'd moved to the Fiji Islands."

"The lesson there," Pete said, "let the coach *coach*. High school up north where I taught for a couple years? They had a JV coach, he was on a streak, 17-0 in league--this is basketball--and the parents got him fired. The principal caved in."

"Let me guess," Tammy said, "playing-time was a factor."

"You're kind of a genius," Pete said. "What sports *don't* you know something about?"

"Well I'm not a great swimmer."

"Now *that* . . . you *gotta* be kidding me."

“I know, you’d think. The ocean and all. I mean I’m not going to drown out there, but I won’t beat many folks in a 50 yard freestyle . . . I was on a swim team when I was a teenager, briefly, but the flip turn got me. It threw off my equilibrium. I’ve kind of resisted the activity ever since.”

“*Activity*, that’s kinda funny. I was on a swim team too as a kid, not a superstar swimmer either, but I did drown a guy once.”

Tammy’s mouth dropped open.

“Not that big a deal,” Pete said, “I mean there were circumstances involved. But don’t tell anyone.”

It occurred to Pete that he really didn’t *know* Tammy, but that if she *did* tell someone, he’d just pass it off as a joke.

Anyhow you might as well throw her a change-up. This is how it played out in their other get-together too, Pete happening to bring up the fact that his friend Ray procured him a gun once.

Which got Tammy off her surf instructor high horse, changed the tone of the rest of the meal. Today she wasn’t in the same role, since she was looking to him to

help her *out*--but still, shake things up a little, it never hurts.

“You’re putting me on,” she said. “I *think . . . Aren’t you?*”

“Like I said, you live long enough things happen. It’s not always anyone’s fault . . . Your blog though, why not make YouTube videos instead?”

“Gosh. Pardon?”

“My thought lately is people don’t read. Or at least their eyes don’t move when they try, so they only pick up the words directly in front of them. At *most . . .* I mean, what blogs are popular anymore? *Name a couple.*”

“Are you just saying that,” Tammy said, “because you don’t feel like helping me today? In which case, that’s fine, we can reschedule.”

Pete was going to answer but the side gate rattled and someone came into the pool area. It was Betty, the flight attendant for Southwest. She swam laps occasionally, looked pretty good in doing so.

Pete had tried to put a little bit of a move on Betty once, early on, before Marlene moved in, and he got the polite but firm rejection.

Now she was joining them, sitting down, more talkative than ever. Pete wondered what *this* was all about . . . but he'd been through enough that you positively *couldn't* explain about women to assume it was about anything.

The good part, Tammy opened up right away with Betty, all Pete had to do was introduce them--and soon Tammy disclosed why she was here, and wouldn't you know Betty was a literature major in her day and in fact loved editing.

“With all due respect,” Pete said, “you *edit*?”

“Golly, he was listening *after* all,” Tammy said to Betty. “The vibe I was getting, before you came along, was that his interest pertained largely to me stripping down and going in the water.”

“Tell me about it,” Betty said, and when Pete scanned them both, neither one was doing much smiling.

So yeah, he really better cut back on the fraternity boy nonsense, there *was* a point where you wear out your welcome.

“But I’m serious,” Pete said, “you didn’t answer the question.”

“Yes I *do* edit, for your information,” Betty said. “I help friends who write things on Amazon. I’m their set of eyes, you might say.”

“What *kind* of things?” Pete said.

“Cooking tips, gardening books, memoirs. Is there a *problem* with that?”

“Not at all. In fact more power to you. 95 percent of the self-published stuff on Amazon is bad, if you don’t mind my opinion. None of it should have been inflicted on the world.”

“I beg to differ,” Tammy said. “I’ve found plenty of good stories on there.”

“Like what?” Pete said.

“Well, for starters, do you like mysteries?”

Pete said that depends.

“There’s this one series,” Tammy continued, “I’m hooked, I gobble up every new book *in* it.”

“Is that right.”

“The main character, you might say she’s a Renaissance woman. She’s multiply talented, but her focus in the books is she solves cold cases for the police.”

“Oh,” Pete said. “Sounds a little simplistic though, like they need to throw a couple *subplots* in there, spice it up. Don’t you think?”

“Not at all. I love the character. I’m happy to read about her doing a *crossword puzzle*.”

“One question on that,” Pete said, “how do they handle the sex scenes?”

“What do you *mean*?” Tammy said.

“I mean, does your gal . . . get down in the trenches, and if she does, how is that described? . . . Or it’s not styled that way.”

“What a chauvinist pig question,” Tammy said. “Out of everything you could ask about the series.”

“That’s for *sure*,” Betty said.

Pete had had the chauvinist expression thrown at him recently, and thought it must be making a comeback. In fact just yesterday, at the Indian Wells

tennis. Though that person was semi-joking. These women didn't seem to be.

But he thought it was a reasonable question, and he wouldn't admit this to anyone, but he was toying with writing a mystery novel of his own.

He even had a bit of an outline. It was based on Mitch, the bartender Weatherby's on Chestnut Street in San Francisco.

You could have one of those, good-looking guy, bachelor, lives on a houseboat across the bay, say Sausalito. The guy has a colorfully uneven past that may or may not fully reveal itself.

He listens to people's problems, especially when they're on their second or third round. If something hits a nerve, he may cross a line or two and help them out.

Pete didn't dare run the story by a human. His tennis partner Chandler, for example, a clever guy but no-nonsense . . . *he* might have a good suggestion but his *overall* reaction could ruin your confidence and your author career is over before it starts.

Back poolside on this 76 degree February Saturday afternoon at the *Cheater Five Apartments*, Tammy had

her laptop open now and she and Betty were studying the screen intently.

“If I use WordPress,” Tammy was saying, “then I believe I can set up a forum as well.”

“I’d agree with that,” Betty said. “Always a plus to offer the readers opportunity to interact.”

Pete cleared his throat. “With all due respect, I’ll make this announcement *one* more time. Go with YouTube.”

“I’m sorry?” Betty said.

“What I was starting to tell *her*,” Pete said, “people like to watch and and listen. No *readers* out there anymore, too dull and time consuming. Also hard work.”

“Well we’ll concede you your opinion,” Betty said, “I’m surprised actually Tammy would be consulting with you in the first place.”

Tammy said, “Pete doesn’t look like it, he could fool you a million ways, but he was a journalist.”

“You’re overdoing it,” Pete said. “Newspaper writer. Leave it at that.”

“Now I’m *impressed*,” Betty said. “I had no idea.”

It dawned on Pete that maybe he'd have better luck with some of these women if he laid more of his past on the table, upfront, emphasizing his strong points . . . though probably it wouldn't make a stitch of difference.

“What you do,” he said, “first, show yourself surfing--and ideally not in a bulky wetsuit, but that's up to you. Then come out of the water onto the beach and conduct the rest of your brief lecture--and I mean that, *brief*. People's attention spans are *shot*. You give 'em the one or two points you want to make that day on women's surfing and you click the heck off.”

“*Oh* brother,” Tammy said, and Betty was reacting poorly as well.

The side gate jiggled again, and Holy Mackerel who was coming through it now but Ned Mancuso.

“Hey gang,” Ned said. Pete noticed the upbeat facial act was the same as always, but he didn't have quite the normal bounce in his step.

Ned came over and bent down and gave Tammy a peck on the cheek. Pete had run Ned by Tammy one time and she responded that she was pretty sure she

knew who he *was*, from the *Crowe's Nest*, the tavern down by the beach.

Pete didn't quite buy that then, and he definitely wasn't buying it now, with Tammy holding Ned's hand while he was leaning over, and taking a few extra seconds to let go.

None of Pete's business of course.

Then Ned, without missing a beat, he introduces himself to Betty, and leans in and gives *her* a healthy and rather lengthy peck on the cheek as well . . . Pete thinking *there* you go, Ned with whatever enigmatic trait you need, to pull that shit off, and everyone's thrilled all around . . . whereas if he, *Pete* tried it, someone'd be liable to call the police, or at the very least slap him.

"Well now that we're all unexpectedly here," Pete said, "can I offer anyone anything? Food? Beverage?"

The three of them indicated that would be fine, and Ned sat down and it was suddenly like old-home week around the pool, and Pete felt like the odd man out and wished he hadn't offered anything, except he had, so he went upstairs to try to put something together.

It took him a few minutes, he filled a couple trays and a mini ice chest, and when he got back down there they were huddled around the computer again, this time Ned in the middle, running the show.

No one acknowledged Pete's return until he started passing out stuff, and Tammy said, "Ned thinks *videos* are a good promotional tool, for *my* idea."

Saying this like it was a brand new brainstorm, not *Ned thinks so too*, just throwing it out fresh. What a surprise.

"Well that'd be one way, yeah," Pete said. "I thought they were into blogging though."

"That could work too," Ned said. "I always like visuals though. You're caught up in it right away."

No point broaching the subject again, but if *Ned* suggested Tammy surf on the videos in more minimal attire than a full body gray wetsuit, she'd say sure and probably go buck naked.

Anyhow . . . you had to seriously wonder what Ned was doing here.

He'd been by here only once . . . and that had been a middle-of-the-night deal, Ned laying a bit of timely information on Pete that he might find useful.

Unless this was about something as unlikely as a pair of Lakers tickets Ned couldn't use this evening--this was out of character.

If he did say so himself, Pete pulled together a pretty nice spread. Worked a little Costco magic with the microwave, and after a few minutes Tammy closed the laptop and everyone was stuffing their faces.

When they'd more or less devoured everything Tammy said, "Pete, you wouldn't happen to have a tad of something sweet, would you, to finish things off?"

"I know," Betty said. "A little tea and a tid-bit would work wonderfully about now."

"Tea yes," Pete said, "but unfortunately nothing dessert-like at the moment." Which wasn't entirely true, there was an unopened box of these frozen cream puffs up there, dang good, but someone had left them in his fridge a couple days ago and he wasn't sure if the person was coming back.

“I’ve got some Oreo’s,” Betty offered, and for whatever reason that prompted the two women to huddle for a minute, and then Tammy announced that were headed into town, and did anyone want to join them.

There was *zero* conviction in *that* offer, and Pete declined right away, and Ned shook his head thanks, and Tammy and Betty, without much more fanfare, picked up and left.

“That was some huddle,” Pete said.

“Intense,” Ned said. “Like they were gearing for a middle eastern summit.”

“Sounds like they’re craving sweets though,” Pete said. “Particularly Tammy.”

“Big-time.”

“She *always* like that, in your experience, or just particular times of the month?”

“Particular times,” Ned said, clearly not concerned about disguising the fact that he really *did* know Tammy pretty well.

Pete said, “That’s one place the male species can’t win. You have to admit. If they’re acting different--*more*

strange than just craving *sweets*, I'm talking--but if you even *raise the possibility* that it could have to do with the time of the month . . . they'll flat out want to butcher you."

"Oh yeah. You bring *that* up, if they had a machete handy they'd use it. I'm *convinced* of that."

"So," Pete said. "What's cooking?"

Ned sat there fingering his temples, staring at the pool, not saying anything for a while. Something obviously *was* up, but he also had his pride.

Pete said, "Let me break the ice here . . . And what I'm saying is straight from the hip, so you want to be offended . . . that's *your* business."

Ned looked away from pool and locked on Pete.

Pete said, "You're not the most trustworthy guy, you got a sleaze bag element to you--and honestly? Since day one I felt like I gotta watch my back. And that concern has *evolved*, but at the core it hasn't *changed*."

Ned managed a weak smile. "Anything *else*?" he said.

"Yeah," Pete said. "You have a good heart."

Ned looked at him a little longer and then swiveled his head back toward the pool.

Pete said, “And the only reason I say all this . . . is *Man, talk* to me. I’ve *been* there . . . underneath that act of yours you’re as stubborn as I am . . . but God *damn*.”

Ned spoke softly, and it wasn’t the volume that was different but the resignation in Ned’s voice that Pete didn’t like at all, the unfamiliar timbre.

“Yeah okay it’s a guy,” Ned said. “*Always* a guy. What do you want me to say?”

“Who is he?” Pete said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not *worrying* about it. But you’re pissing me off.”

“It’s a little complex,” Ned said. “We go back.”

“Get me to the bottom line,” Pete said. “Cause you’re reaching out, stopping by here. You know that right?”

“Actually, no,” Ned said. “There’s a restaurant opened up--today’s the grand opening--buddy of mine, down PCH, he’s got this concept, the burgers and brew shit in *front*, and a mini-golf place in *back*.”

“Jeez. Indoor?”

“Yeah. Year round action. You can putt every night until 2.”

“That’s ringing a bell,” Pete said, “They have one of those up north, in the Mission.”

“Oh. How they making out?”

“Sounded busy. Millennials. Of course that type thing, tastes can change quick.”

“Mini golf’s been around a while though.” Ned said.

“That’s true,” Pete said. “When I was a kid, and used to go to my cousin’s in San Mateo? They had a huge spread down there, four 18-hole courses. You remember that *19th hole* deal, where you shoot to see if you win a free game?”

“Yeah.”

“One of the courses, you could get close to the hole, except you had to lay down in a kind of fountain thing and stretch out your arm under this screen, but then you could persuade the ball into the cup.”

“So you’d get wet but win free games?”

“Oh yeah. *All* day long. Those were good times.”

“That’s a good story,” Ned said.

“So you were kidding,” Pete said.

“Bout *what* now?”

“The reason you’re here . . . because your happy-go-lucky act is so thick, you can’t turn it off if your life depends on it.”

A guy was coming across the parking lot, a tenant named Ed who Pete knew. He hung around the pool fence for a minute and Pete said hello, and they mentioned the weather and the guy went upstairs and disappeared into his apartment.

“*Bottom*, bottom line?” Ned said. “I’m not here for the mini golf bullshit . . . but I’m not here to ask your help either.”

“I never said you were.”

“Oh.”

Pete took a second and said, “Good, we got that out of the way . . . So, you need help?”

“You know . . . you don’t listen,” Ned said.

“Surprised you’ve gotten to this point, frankly, that type of deficiency.”

“You mean intellect-wise?”

“No. Wasn’t where I was going.”

“Because whatever minimal brainstorming I tried to lay on Tammy and Betty there, they rolled their eyes.”

“Oh yeah, they’re *all* mixed up. When you were upstairs, I almost had to get out of here.”

“Forgetting even that you needed help?”

“You keep coming back to that,” Ned said, “like one of those balloons at the fair you shoot with a water pistol. Thing keeps re-inflating.”

It was an odd analogy, but Pete asked Ned how about some coffee, and Ned said he wouldn’t mind.