

First look at Joe Keppler's upcoming suspense novel,

Stix 'N Brix

CHAPTER ONE

Charles violently pounded his fist on the salon's hand carved teak coffee table. Because of his fanatical rage, he was oblivious to the lurching motion of his luxurious surroundings. He was certainly inattentive to the action taking place just past the smoked glass sliding door separating he and his companion from the rest of the group.

"We've got to do something to stop this from happening," he demanded to his audience of one. "You mark my word Vinny, this guy is capable of blowing it for all of us."

Vincent D. Kastanza didn't share the same sense of urgency as his bumbling employer, Charles Bradlin. "Charles," Vinny sighed, "the old man hasn't even hired the guy yet. Granted, he probably will, but it'll be okay, trust me." Charles, prone to fits of paranoia, calmed somewhat whenever Vinny used his trademark 'trust me' line.

As Vinny soothed his boss' easily stoked temper, a completely different struggle was taking place just outside the plush interior of the deluxe fishing boat. "Take your hand off the reel, and let him have all the line that he wants," the first mate instructed Billy. "Let him run deep so he swallows the friggin hook!" Just then Billy Capel's shout pierced the air, "He got away, he's gone."

"No way sport. He's still there," the veteran first mate, Darryl insisted. "Keep your eye on the water over there, about thirty yards just aft. He's about to break the surface, and you'll see the prettiest sight you can imagine. So start reelin' in the line, quick but smooth now," Darryl coached Billy in typical Carolina boatman total control.

It was at that exact moment, with almost magical timing, that the prize trophy did indeed become airborne. All hands on deck knew from previous encounters, that once an Atlantic blue marlin, breaks the dark-blue, white capped ocean's surface to begin their graceful, seductive dance, how easy it was to become hooked on the powerful, almost spiritual allure of sport fishing.

"Tighten up the slack in the line," Darryl shouted, more out of encouragement than direction. "He'll try to spit out that hook, so don't give him any quarters. Keep that line taught."

"How big do you think he is?" Billy shouted back over his shoulder grimacing in pain. He hadn't been latched onto the fish for more than a few minutes; and already his lower arms were beginning to burn from the retreating weight of his reluctant catch.

Before anyone had an opportunity to reply, the balance of power was thrown into reverse, literally. The powerful single Cummins diesel engine launched the massive fifty-eight foot Carolina custom-built sports fisher, into a near instantaneous retreating direction. It was as if the awesome power of that dancing fish was pulling the twenty three-ton boat backwards.

"It's at least a three, maybe four- hundred pounder," roared Captain Max from the fly bridge, over the heavy metal whining of his boats' massive power plant. "We're gonna be here for a while, so get comfortable, and listen good to what Darryl tells you to do, if you want to bring him in," Max bellowed with undeniable authority.

CHAPTER TWO

The furthest thing from Martin Sampson's mind was fighting some damn fish. He had his own battle looming. And so far he wasn't fairing very well. Yet, what was most defeating to Sampson was the simple fact that he couldn't reach his boss. Charles Bradlin had told Martin to call him just as soon as the engineer's report came in, no matter what.

The technical evaluation, regarding the soils condition of Grants Landing-the fifty-acre site Martin was responsible for-had just arrived, and it was just as damaging as the previous engineering company's findings.

According to the report, there were serious concerns with the soils on site. Significant enough concerns for a site development manager like Martin to be in a desperate fit to reach his boss. In addition, Martin had another dilemma. He had a small army of earth moving equipment mobilized to develop the site, but with this newly arrived engineering report, he had to decide if it would be prudent to move forward.

Whether or not all of those dozers, front-end loaders, pans, and monster dump trucks moved a cubic yard of good or bad dirt, Bradlin Homes was paying big bucks, just to have them sit idly by. With an anticipated weather front likely to bring heavy rains within the next thirty-six hours, Martin Sampson was beyond frustration. He was certifiably desperate at this point.

Aside from the steep costs of keeping all of that heavy equipment parked in formation, everyday that slipped by without progress meant the loss of meaningful bonus dollars for Martin. He had to reach Charles to find out what he wanted him to do. He certainly wasn't going to take it upon himself to make a critical decision of moving tons of shit for dirt. That just wouldn't be acceptable in Charles Bradlin's way of thinking.

Martin was growing increasingly impatient. Neither of Charles's cell phones were in range forty miles offshore of the Outer banks. Charles had no desire to be at sea, but he had no say in the matter. And once he heard what his land development manager, Martin Sampson had to report, he'd be pissed that Herschel had demanded that he be fishing. Really pissed.

CHAPTER THREE

"You're telling me that after all I've done for you, that that's the best you can do for me?" Brett Bradlin shouted into the phone in mock astonishment.

"What exactly do you mean by all that you've done for me?" Whit Thomas coldly shouted right back at Brett. "If it wasn't for you and your damn father, screwing up a good thing, I wouldn't be in the precarious position I'm in right now," Thomas screamed. "I can't get any of my sub crews to work on your job site. You're the reason I'm losing all of my moneymaking crews. So listen to me you little snot, you seem like a decent enough kid, but you're in way over your head. I'm going to give you some free advice, and you better damn well listen closely to what I have to say."

Get some help from some of the older guys before you screw up things so bad that they can't be fixed...like your old man has managed to do with your grandfathers company."

Those were the last words Brett heard before the sound of the phone on the other end went dead.

Brett Bradlin had been thrown into the role of a full-blown superintendent when the previous superintendent unexpectedly resigned. Brett, two months out of college had worked summers for his grandfather's company and was a bright young man who enjoyed the business. He was however woefully unprepared for this type of big people's world responsibility.

One of the company's best construction managers, Scot Kruper, had been working closely with Brett for the past few months. He was a highly regarded home building veteran and had been with the company for over ten years. He inherited the task of molding Brett Bradlin into a competent production oriented professional. Scot was highly thought of by everyone in the company, except Charles. He had what was thought to be a minor run in with Charles over some insignificant issue. Unfortunately for Scot, Charles saw it as a much bigger affront.

Scot committed the unforgiveable sin of rebuking Charles in front of others. Charles's ego was much too fragile for what he considered a direct insult, so he, in his small-minded way began to make things difficult for Scot in retaliation. Scot quickly became fed up with Charles's endless series of mind games, but it was only after Charles began to meddle with Scot's compensation program that Scot decided to resign immediately and go to work for one of Bradlin's competitors.

Unfortunately for Bradlin Homes, when Scot resigned, Bradlin's long-time production manager, Dusty Bennett, became so incensed with Charles feeble mismanagement of the organization that he quit as well. No one was overseeing the overall management of the Bradlin Homes day-to-day production activities. The loss of both Scot and Dusty and the resulting chaos of their departure began to slowly stifle the company's ability to function.

With Scot gone there was no one keeping an eye on young Brett. Scot had been expected to take Brett under his wing and teach him the proper way to manage a fast paced new home construction site. Now Scot was gone and that was costing not only Brett, but the entire organization dearly. Things were clearly not going well for young Brett Bradlin, and it was only 7:00 AM on an already oppressively humid summer morning.

When the construction trailer door slammed open, it stormed the last person in the world Brett wanted or needed to see. Things were about to get progressively worse for this twenty-three year old, rookie home building superintendent.

CHAPTER FOUR

The expedition had been Herschel's idea. As soon as Herschel Bradlin discovered that Billy Capel, had an unquenchable passion for sport fishing, Herschel seized upon what he felt would be the perfect opportunity to impress the man that he was targeting to save his company.

Over the years, most of Herschel's plans had proven successful. The elder Bradlin was a virtual icon throughout the southern Maryland home building community. In the late sixties, a younger Herschel had set his sights on building five to ten new homes a year. Yet in a few short years after he founded Bradlin Homes, literally out of the back of his pickup truck, he was closing over a hundred homes a year. Later, in incredibly prosperous years, Bradlin would settle close to twice that number of new homes.

Herschel Bradlin had devoted his life to achieving a level of success that others could only envy, but times had changed. Now, at this juncture in his life, when he should have been enjoying the spoils of his life-long efforts, he was deeply mired in a battle to save his floundering com-

pany. Unfortunately, on many days he had little constitution left to personally join in the fray.

Herschel Bradlin was desperately in need of William J. Capel Jr. Billy was going to save Herschel's company. Herschel was sure of it. First however, he had to persuade young William to leave an idyllic position with one of the country's largest home building companies to come join in the fray. Billy would be a key factor in ridding the company of its increasing incompetence and corruption. Fortunately, Herschel finally had come to grips with the precarious position of his once high-flying home-building organization.

Subsequently, Herschel knew he would have to do the selling job of his lifetime to bring Billy on board. If only his health would allow him to see the situation through. At the same time, he needed to be certain that Charles wouldn't interfere with his plan. Billy was going to be Herschel's white knight. His savior. He would right the ship. Charles on the other hand, Herschel wasn't so sure of.

As Herschel glanced at his watch, the Carolina sun was beginning to set. The fishing boats were due to be entering the channel within a matter of moments.

CHAPTER FIVE

The official greeting party was assembled on the marina's main dock, awaiting the return of "the boys", as Herschel referred to the members of the fishing expedition.

The seemingly endless line of returning sports fishermen with their three-foot high trailing wakes had begun to file through the channel into the marina harbor. What was a somewhat surprising sight to first-time casual observers of the returning fishing vessels was that some of the crafts were painted in distinctive shades of frilly pastels.

It was hard to fathom that the main hull of a 55-foot Carolina-built boat named 'BIG DICK', would be coated with a shiney, bright, peach more representative of a lipstick shade than the color scheme of a testosterone producing fish-fighting machine.

As the boats rumbled into the harbor, onlookers stopped to see how each boat did that day. Small colorful little flags depicting the outlines of fish, ruffling in the wind, represented each boat's catch. The more flags the better the day.

It was an especially good time of the year to hunt for some of the most coveted big game fish to be found in the Atlantic; thanks in large part to all of the high-pressure systems lined up in the south Atlantic. Churning seas seemed to cause a veritable feeding frenzy among the bountiful array of sport fish, especially in the legendary Oregon Canyon area, from which the fishermen were returning.

Almost every returning boat displayed at least one flag. By a quick, informal tally, based on the abundance of the small colorful flags flying in the warm breeze, the last Bermuda high that had raced by, two hundred miles offshore, had obviously served as a wake up call for the blue and white marlin population.

"Is that them?" asked Charlene. "All of those big boats look the same."

"That's them," Herschel nodded. He could tell their boat from the others because of the insignia of a slightly goofy looking duck imprinted on the preserver chest predominately displayed on the main deck of the 'Dumb Duck.' He might have been advancing in age and in declining health, yet when he was in full control of all his faculties, Herschel did not miss many details.

"Yes Herschel, that's their boat. And by the looks of it, they tagged both a white and a blue marlin!" Catt exclaimed. Catherine Capel was a veteran wife of a sport-fishing fanatic. She had learned long ago the meaning of each flag. She could also tell by the flags being flown upside down that "the boys" had released their catches.

"Little boys with their toys," Lisa mumbled passively to herself. "I hope all of this is worth it."

Lisa Parker was in attendance for one reason. Herschel had asked her to come along to help him in the critical negotiations with Billy. And whenever Herschel asked Lisa for anything, she was more than pleased to comply.

Herschel had all but picked up the entire tab for Lisa's law school costs, simply out of the goodness of his big heart. The petite, perky, freckled-faced redhead was the youngest daughter of two of Herschel's closest friends that had died in a horrible automobile accident years ago. Immediately following their tragic death, Herschel gladly took on the role of Lisa's surrogate father, a relationship that both Herschel and Lisa cherished dearly. Herschel had always secretly wished that Lisa had been one of his own.

Lisa was an incessant force of perpetual energy packed in a tiny frame--barely five feet tall. She often rebelled against being described as perky, but she begrudgingly admitted to herself that she could understand the description. She couldn't have weighed over a hundred pounds fully clothed, but she was, at times, as feisty as someone three times her size. Though small in stature, Lisa was impossible to miss. Maybe it was the fiery dark red curly hair that drew others immediate attention. Or it might have been her constant animated hand and body gestures that embellished her non-verbal as well as verbal communication skills.

Most of her inherited freckles had disappeared both naturally and otherwise years before, but for those who had known her since 'Uncle Herschel' took her in years ago, the early memories of the rambunctious, pigtailed, freckled-face tomboy were not easily forgotten. She didn't consider herself pretty, but she had developed a sort of classic, sharply defined attractiveness that had turned many heads. She could be in a room with a hundred other people, but it was generally the short, feisty redhead that most people remembered.

When Lisa became old enough, she worked part time for Bradlin Homes. After college, when she found the job market limited, Herschel hired her full time until she passed the Maryland Bar exam. She became Bradlin Homes full-time staff attorney which was a luxury that both Lisa and Herschel appreciated.

She took her role as the company's protector of justice very seriously. While there were some that might have felt she took her role too seriously at times, Herschel personally made sure that Lisa kept things in the proper perspective. On more than one occasion Herschel would stroll into Lisa's office, grab her by the hand, while humming a song, and start dancing with his favorite young lady.

The wise old man could do no wrong in her eyes. No matter how frivolous Lisa found this fishing expedition to be, she was a team-player and would do her part to make sure that Herschel came home with his catch.

"So what have you brought us back?" Herschel asked.

"Well," beamed John David Holmes, "our new friend here caught the big one. Catherine, your husband is quite the fisherman. He fought that four-hundred pounder for over an hour and a half, and never complained once except when the fish took the whole spool of line for the third time and Billy asked the Captain to take out a gun and just shoot the damn fish," Bradlin's lanky,

controller joked.

"Four-hundred pound fish!" exclaimed Charlene. "Where is it?"

"We released him," Billy said almost indignantly. "You don't kill a beautiful creature like that just for the hell of it." Understandably, Charlene was skeptical of his fish story.

Just then, Charles and Vinny emerged from behind the salon's huge tinted sliding doors. It was obvious that neither Charles nor Vinny had participated in any fishing activities on this day.

The mate was cleaning the fishing deck when he looked up and said to the land-based skeptics, "Folks if you don't believe Billy here, you'll get to see first hand that he's not only telling you the truth, but he's really being overly modest of his efforts.

Captain Max videotaped the whole fight from right up there in the tower, including the part when the blue did his little jig across the surface of the swells," Darryl waxed poetic. All eyes trained on Capt. Max still on the fly bridge, covering his electronic fish-finding apparatus. With a slight grin and an even less conspicuous nod the good Captain signaled that what they had heard was not some groundless boastful fish story.

"Well Billy, where's our dinner since you released the big one?" Lisa asked. She had barely finished her sentence when Darryl reached into the live well and started pulling out six yellow fin tunas in the twenty-five to thirty-five pound range, tossing them out onto the docks worn planking.

"Dinner is served," he announced with an exaggerated stage bow and a sheepish grin.