

## Chapter 1

As usual, it was about 9:45 in the morning when Charlie set out for his morning run. He always followed the same route starting from his Malibu apartment. Turning left from his front door, he jogged down Wildwood Flower Road to a right on Zuma Bay Way. This corner took him to Zuma Beach that paralleled the Pacific Coast highway. Here he would jog north about 4½ miles when he would stop and stretch. These exercises usually lasted about 20 minutes and were important to keep him from cramping. Then he reversed his course to return home and followed with another stretching routine. Altogether, he needed about two hours to complete his run.

Charlie had lost a lot of weight since starting this regimen five years ago. Then, he was more or less fit, but a bulge did crowd his belt. Now, he was lean, but not ripped. That was for younger body builders. Still, the lines in his face were deeper. His eyes had a sunken look. His stomach was flat with no fat to show.

At first, it had been hard to get started. Years of heavy drinking, smoking cigars, and chasing girls had taken their toll. Even today, Charlie knew he would never be able to achieve a fitness that a resolute abstainer would enjoy given the same level of effort. But he was satisfied. He had persevered and now, he was in the best condition of his life. An example of this was how his time had dropped. When he first did this 10-mile run, he needed three plus hours to complete it. He had to stop many times to catch his breath and the next day was a horror. Charlie was full of aches from head to toe. He needed three days to recover and his next run was just a mile up and back. A good lesson was learned. Start slowly and work up to his goal.

How did he become a runner? Charlie often asked that of himself with no clear answer. Was it the gray hair beginning to sprout along his temples? Was he feeling the competition of the younger players in the bars? The answer in both cases was no. The gray hair was there and dying it wouldn't change that fact. He hadn't been to any bars for about five years during his "lost years" after his trip to Paris with Rose. During that time, he learned he didn't need to carouse. He couldn't anyway and he survived. Nope, no feeling of competition there. Simply put, there wasn't an immediate answer. But Charlie did know this: he was feeling better than he had in years. His head was clear and his breathing was easy. That was enough. At least that was the answer he always came up with. So, let it go at that.

Upon return from his daily run, Charlie got ready for the rest of his day. It usually was comprised of two parts. The afternoons were spent giving piano lessons and the evenings given over to playing at his nephew, Jake Harper's restaurant, The Swordfish.

Charlie got into these two gigs because the TV jingle industry had pretty well dried up during his lost years. Occasionally, he now gets a contract, but the lucrative days of beach houses were over. Lessons and dinner jazz took their places in his life. They didn't pay as well, but the income was steady and paid the bills.

Most of Charlie's students were youngsters being forced to take lessons by their parents. They didn't have much talent or interest. They would stay for several months until by mutual consent, they would pass on. Occasionally, a student with talent would appear that would spark Charlie's interest, but even there, as other interests, college, or work intervened, these youngsters would move on as well. This didn't really upset Charlie. After all, how can one tell if talent exists until a stab at playing is made? At the very least, the students learned a bit about

music and perhaps understand what a good pianist was doing while playing a complex piece. So, the time and money spent wasn't a loss.

The evening gigs were where Charlie enjoyed himself. Jake was an easy person to work for. As chef, he focused on cooking meals that were well received by critics while his Japanese wife, Kana, which means "Powerful," ran the business end. They had met while Jake was stationed in Japan with the Army. This suited Jake just as well as he was the first to say that he and school-book figures never got along too well.

The restaurant itself was definitely high scale. One ordered meals there from the left side of the page. The right side was too discouraging for most people. This meant that Jake's clientele was affluent and of a certain age that did not like hard metal blasting down their sushi. Charlie's jazz was quieter and reminded people of a more romantic time in music. It was a light "cool" sound that emphasized the melody of a song. Of course, Charlie always accepted requests that led to nice tips. He also discretely displayed his cd's that he had recorded. They generated a small supplement to his night's wages.

His five lost years also led him to playing songs in his head. Anything to relieve the anxiety of isolation. Sounds that he hadn't heard since he was a teen-ager came back to him. Chet Baker, Oscar Peterson's Trio, Ahmad Jamal were among the artists that came to mind. Subsequently, when he started to get his life back together, he found a used Yamaha upright piano and began to revive his musical skills. The piano didn't have the booming sound of his Steinway baby grand, but it did emphasize the right register for his ear. He didn't like bright, tinkly chimes but deeper, sonorous sounds. His Yamaha matched Chick Corea's E-flat flugelhorn perfectly.

Playing at The Swordfish allowed him to try new phrasing of old songs. Occasionally, he would add some singing. His baritone voice was a bit thin, but it worked well enough as long as he didn't overdo it. One thing for sure, he never sang the songs he recorded for kids. Recalling them, he was amazed he was never sued by parents who really heard their lyrics. They were not innocent nursery rhymes. But they did give Charlie a laugh when he played them again. Altogether, what happened was a marked improvement, recovery if you will, of long-lost skills in technique and improvising. With quiet electronic rhythm beats, Charlie's music was attracting some attention among jazz aficionados. They would come to the bar and just listen for a few drinks. This, in turn, led to Charlie getting occasional paid recording studio gigs. They also helped to pay the bills and it did tickle Charlie's ego that he still had some musical chops.

Charlie usually got to The Swordfish around 6:30, just ahead of the evening crowd. Tonight was no different. He swung by the employees on his way to the bar. There he got the first of many club sodas with lemons and checked in with Kana to see who had made reservations. He did not bother with Jake as he was busy getting the kitchen ready for the evening's business.

"Hi Kana. How's my favorite niece?"

Kana was about five feet, three inches tall. Her features were fully Asian with a round face surrounded by jet black hair. Her features were delicate and unlined. She would remain so through a lifetime of work. She wore a black pantsuit trimmed at the collar with a modest string of pearls. Her tiny waist was cinched with a dark red belt highlighting a Mexican silver buckle that emphasized an Aztec calendar. Her hands were tipped with polish that matched her belt.

Kana smiled and gave Charlie a kiss on the cheek. Teasing, she replied, "Charlie, you're old, but still a rogue."

"Indeed I am. When will you run away with me?"

“You couldn’t afford me.”

Pouting his lower lip out, Charlie mocked a lost swain, “Yes, that’s right, but going broke trying would be fun.”

Giving him a poke in the ribs, Kana retorted, “You’ve been there and done that. Now what can you offer to me? If nothing, then my heart belongs to Jake.”

“As where it should be. But, seriously, anyone coming in tonight?”

Kana reviewed her reservation list. Mumbling, “no, nooo, nope, you know them, ah! here’s a new name. Ever hear of a Mr. Aaron Cohen?”

Charlie’s ears perked up at that name. “Yes, I do. He’s a local real estate wheeler dealer. Mostly business properties. I don’t know him personally, but the papers feature him as a sponsor of many charitable events. Definitely the type of person you want to make into a long-term guest here. He could easily use The Swordfish as a wonderful place to do business deals.”

Kana did not need to have a picture drawn for her. “I’ll place him where he’s near the piano but not in the middle of traffic.”

“Good girl. Maybe he’ll run away with you.”

“He could afford me.”

“But could you afford him?”

“Probably not, but a girl can dream can’t she?”

“What, and miss all this? And Jake’s charm?”

Laughing, Kana said, “Now, old man, get to your piano. Let me have my lust with Jake while dreaming of this Mr. Cohen.”

Charlie went to his piano, looked through various score sheets, notes he had recorded with some innovative ideas, and selected a number of standard pieces he knew would be wanted through the evening. He didn’t spend a lot of time making these selections because no evening ever went as planned. It was easier and more fun to let things play out if the pun can be accepted.

Once settled here, Charlie started running some scales in different keys. Doing so loosened his hands to allow for a lighter touch on the keys. Like a runner stretching, his hands needed to be warm and loose if the notes were to flow like a gentle rivulet of sound drops.

At 7:00 pm, the doors were opened, and the first diners were seated. Charlie started his evening’s concert. These people were never called customers but rather guests. Kana and Jake were their hosts for as long as they held their table. Their meals were never rushed and no bill was ever presented until the guest requested it. Even to slip it discretely under a plate was a real no-no. Doing so suggested the guests had overstayed their welcome and that could never be the case no matter how long they lingered. Occasionally, Kana’s patience was tried but never broken. Guests were always welcome. This policy paid dividends. This clientele appreciated the unhurried pace of their dinners and came back often. That rewarded Kana’s patience.

As the evening progressed, an older man and his wife entered. Kana met them and was told a Mr. Cohen had a reservation for 8:00 pm. Kana smiled and welcomed them to their table that awaited them. She gave to each of them a menu and said that Jack would be their server. Meanwhile, was there anything they wanted to drink. The Cohens asked for a house pinot grigio. When Jack arrived a moment later, his tray held their glasses of wine.

“Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, good evening. Here is the wine you requested. I’m Jack and I’ll be your host. Please don’t hesitate to ask for anything that will make your evening more

pleasurable. Now, why don't you review the menu for a bit and I'll be back to answer any questions you might have."

"Jack, this is our first time here at The Swordfish, and after hearing a lot about it, we're very curious to try it."

"I hope you heard good things, sir."

"That we did and they brought us here. So, what is your specialty?"

We do a lot of seafoods with a Japanese flavor. Swordfish is clearly a centerpiece here, but not our only seafood. Scallops, mussels, freshwater fish...you name it. We also do a dynamite steak here."

Mrs. Cohen was clearly enjoying everything she was experiencing. "Jack, why don't you surprise us? Can you plan the meal?"

Jack brightened at this idea. Occasionally, he was allowed to bring guests into his home here he could show off. Taking the menus, he asked, "Wonderful. Nothing would make me happier. But I must ask, do you have any dietary restrictions?"

Mr. Cohen snorted and asked, "Do you mean, are we kosher? The answer is no. As long as it palatable, we'll eat anything."

"Thank you sir. That opens up a wide range of alternatives."

"Then we're ready."

The meal started off with an appetizer of diced mushrooms turned in a light butter sauce garnished with a dash of truffles. The wine was a prosecco that highlighted the combination. Following that was a shrimp salad with flavorings of teriyaki. A glass of chardonnay accompanied this course. The main course was a swordfish steak done to a medium turn. A medium riesling was selected to match the sweetness of the fish.

As the Cohens progressed through their meal, they became attracted to Charlie's piano. "Jack, who is playing?"

"That's Charlie Harper. He's our regular pianist here. Do you have a request for him to play? He'd be happy to do so."

"Does he know *Chanson d'Amor*?" That's our theme song from when we were courting. If he could play it, it would make our anniversary this evening just perfect."

"Mazel Tov! How many years?"

"This is special: 40."

"Then let me ask Charlie. I'm sure he knows it."

Going over to Charlie, Jack nodded to the Cohen's table. "Charlie, I know Kana told you about the Cohens, well, they're here at table three."

Charlie nodded.

"Well, tonight is their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and they've been pulling out all the stops. I've been planning their entire meal, and they have enjoyed themselves thoroughly. But their love song is *Chanson d'Amour*. Do you know it?"

Charlie looked over at the couple, smiled, and segued into the romantic notes of their love song. The Cohens smiled broadly and gave each other a kiss. Meanwhile, Jack went to the kitchen and ordered an anniversary cake. This was a specialty of Jake's. He had created it from a tiramisu recipe that was always a hit. On its top, he made a 40 with chocolate flakes. As Charlie finished his request, Jack brought out the wedding cake with two flutes of champagne.

Seeing this, Mrs. Cohen squealed with delight as Jack served it. Afterwards, the Cohens ordered coffee with brandy. While waiting for it, he asked Jack if Charlie could come over for a moment. Charlie finished his tune and announced a short pause. Then, grabbing a cd, he smiled and came over to the Cohens.

Mr. Cohen stood to welcome Charlie, shake hands, and introduce his wife. "We have seldom enjoyed such a warm happy evening as we have here. As Jack told you, this is our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and between his menu and your music, it has become a wonderful memory."

Taking a seat, Charlie smiled again and offered his cd. "Congratulations to the two of you. Here's another sample of my music. Take it with you to enjoy and remember this evening. Seriously, it is our pleasure to see a couple such as your giving such love to each other. It's sadly too rare that we do."

The couple looked at each other and nodded. Mrs. Cohen spoke, "Charlie, we have been blessed. Our family was almost destroyed by the Holocaust, but our fathers survived. They came here after the war where they had relatives. There, they each met Americans and settled into lives of hard work and raising kids. And hard it was. They didn't have skills that were readily saleable, but they had heart. So, they worked. We each came from those families. Aaron worked through Brooklyn College while I worked as a secretary using the steno and typing skills I got in high school."

Charlie interrupted the story here. "How did you two meet? What was your love story? I'm a romantic at heart, and I love love stories."

The Cohens blushed and turned to each other. Mrs. Cohen's eyes said "Yes. Let's tell our story." Mr. Cohen picked it up by saying, "First, if we're to tell our tale, we need to be friends. My name is Aaron and my wife is Doris."

With that introduction, everyone shook hands again. Then Aaron continued, "The truth is, we were each engaged to other people. We had known them since childhood and while things weren't arranged, they were understood. '

Doris broke in, "Mind you, they were both wonderful people. We probably could have had good marriages with them. But love...no, that wasn't the case. Friendship, affection, yes, but love no."

Aaron then continued, "But what did we know? We were just a couple of Jewish kids from traditional families. Then, at a bris..."

Jack asked, "Bris?"

"Jewish circumcision. An ancient commandment that baby boys be circumcised when they are eight days old. It's a time of celebration. Anyway, while there, I met this attractive girl and we started talking."

Doris giggled, "And we haven't stopped since."

Patting his wife's hand, "That's right, and I haven't gotten a word in edgewise since then. Seriously though, we didn't speak with another person there. Just us. As things broke up, I did something I would have never dreamed of doing before."

"And Aaron, I would have never ever given my phone number out to a stranger before. But I did, and he was calling the next day."

"One thing led to another and we knew. We had to get married. No one else would do. Of course, we had let our fiancés know along with their families. This created sadness and turmoil

as could be expected. In the end, however, everyone recognized that anything else would have been a sham that would lead to greater sorrow in the end.”

Charlie was almost in tears with this story. Giving his eyes a quick brush and to change the subject, he said, “Aaron, Doris, there is another person whom you need to meet. The chef, Jack, could you call Jake out?”

“Gladly,” and within a minute, a tall man with a short, military haircut, came out. He was wearing his chef’s hat at a jaunty angle and wearing an immaculate smock. Stuck in a sleeve pocket was a small thermometer. His eyes were blue and surrounded with the lines of a perpetual smile.

“Aaron, Doris, I’d like to introduce the chef, my nephew, Jake Harper. Jake, this is Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, our anniversary couple. Forty years this evening and you made it happen.”

Reaching out, Jake shook the couple’s hands. “It’s been my pleasure to bring a bit of joy to you.”

Aaron asked, “Your meal was simply wonderful. Scrumptious. Where did you learn your art?”

Jake grinned sheepishly and replied, “You’re probably expecting *The Cordon Bleu* or some similar school, but actually, it was the US Army.”

“No!” was the universal, unbelieving answer.

“Yep, that’s correct. Army cooking isn’t what it used to be or what’s shown in the Beetle Bailey cartoon. It’s really good stuff that emphasizes a basic quality for ingredients and honesty in their preparation. I had always been interested in cooking, and when I enlisted, I got sent to their basic culinary school at Ft. Lee, Virginia. From there, I took every course available to military chefs and slowly I learned my trade. Then, I met my wife Kara, who is the real brains behind this restaurant, and we decided to start out for ourselves. The rest, as they say, is history.”

Aaron pushed himself back from the table and said, “Doris, it’s time we left these people to attend their other people here. We’ve taken enough of their time. But, to each of you, our deepest thanks for this wonderful encounter.”

Doris followed her husband’s lead, but said, “Aaron, an idea just occurred to me. Our grandchildren, Lev, and Sadie, will be having their mitzvahs shortly. Perhaps we could have the Harpers do something for us.”

Aaron brightened immediately. “Doris, I remember my first lesson as a young husband and that was to say, ‘Oh yes, Dear.’ But you’ve got something that’s brilliant. Charlie, Jake, here’s my card. Give my secretary a call and make an appointment and let’s talk.”

Both Charlie and Jake took the card with promises to call the next day. The anniversary couple then departed arm in arm while everyone else, even some other patrons, looked on gently.

When Aaron and Doris had departed, Jack returned to his other guests while Charlie and Jake took seats at a side table by the window. Charlie said, “Jake, congratulations! I always said you’d amount to nothing good.”

Jake smiled, “That among other things. So, what to do about this? It’s an opportunity. The question is how to get it through.”

Charlie answered, “The first step is to call as they invited us to do. Then we listen to what they want.”

“Ok. That makes sense.” Jake went on for a few moments until he saw Charlie’s attention was lost. “Uncle Charlie, Uncle Charlie, I’m here. What’s wrong?”

Charlie shook his head and replied, “Nothing. I just saw a face I thought I knew. She’s passed by several times over the past week, but I can’t place her.”

“That’s not surprising considering it’s January and people are bundled up...even here in southern California.”

“Well, no matter. Let’s get back to the Cohens.”