



Smallfish Clover

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Chapter 1

New chapter

SMALLFISH CLOVER

by Heather Shaw

BOOK ONE:

THE ORDER OF THINGS

... the order of things must be supplanted by guts or brains in the interest of survival. —Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David*

CHAPTER 1

He knew by his mother's walk that she had given up trying to make him happy. Now, except to assure herself that he was in tow, she would ignore him, deliberately force him to string along and be the dinghy bumping after her and her interests until, eventually, the two of them would find themselves washed up on the same shore, castaways and complicit.

This was a familiar game.

The boy slowed his pace and searched for an excuse, a place to pitch the mothership upon the rocks. The shop windows reflected pink, yellow, silver, green, for by that time of the afternoon the sun had begun to recede and slip over the edge of the great wall of mountains standing to the east. Simultaneously, the electrical bud of the city relaxed and opened, tentatively at first, then gaining in confidence and warmth. Although it was a city of millions, it was also a city at the beginning of the world. That's what the boy said to himself, for he'd seen the eternity of

savage garden on the plane coming in. Fifty thousand miles of river in that jungle, his mother'd told him, pointing out the window, most of it still officially unexplored.

As the city of light spun around him, he imagined that he was the explorer just back from two, three years of living in a dugout. He slowed for a moment and swayed left and right. It was strange, the unmoving earth, stranger still the people so unaware of him and the dangers he'd faced. Only last week, there'd been the anaconda that swam up in the night to his lightly dipping canoe. Anchoring its tail in the muddy river bottom, it raised its massive head above the gunnels and began to pour silently aboard. When he'd awakened at first light, he was eyeball to eyeball with the monster—and the little boy who'd called the river snags was gone, swallowed headfirst, poisoned and asphyxiated, then devoured, inch by inch. He pulled his knife from the sheath at his waist and sliced open the stupefied snake from beneath its jaw to the end of the swelling. The child was there all right, but gelatinous, pupa-like, dissolving into formlessness in the reptile's powerful acids.

That's when he'd decided to return to civilization. Enough was enough. He had his maps; he had his gold and precious stones. It was a hard and thankless life and he craved a little distinction. The explorer looked around and let himself be dazzled by electricity. What a marvel after all those months and months of dense black swallowing skies. He put his hand in his pocket and fingered his gold. There'd be a decent meal tonight, and a soft bed with soft sheets.

Something wet splattered on his forehead. He wiped at it with his hand and felt the stuff in his hair as well. It happened again. He stopped, looked up. Was it raining? Was it pigeons? What was falling on him?

An old woman, short and round with an apron tied loosely over her belly approached him clicking her tongue and pointing at the row of dark windows above them. She laughed and jabbered as if it were all a silly mistake, then taking a large handkerchief from her pocket, she wiped at his shoulders and the collar of his jacket. He smiled vaguely and tried to get out of her way, but she continued to coo, sorry, sorry, sorry. He noticed that all the teeth on the top of her mouth were capped in gold and he wondered... But suddenly, she'd disappeared and his mother was there. It all happened so fast. He was surprised to see her.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, gripping his shoulder and scanning him from head to foot. She was only an inch or two taller and he was suddenly sick of it.

“Nothing,” he said, brushing her off. “I don’t know. Something fell on me and that lady...”

“Check for your wallet.”

He stuck his hand in his pocket and found it empty. Panicky, he patted his jacket, his shirt, his pockets, again, but he knew she’d taken it. She’d robbed him of his gold and precious jewels.

He stood for a moment, glaring at his mother, and then he began to howl.

Chapter 2

New chapter

The hag. The cow. The fat witch. The return to the hotel was blurred with rage. Ugly. Stupid. Tricked. He felt sick and polluted with the smell of the stinking rag she used to disguise her trespass. Again and again her fat troll fingers slid into his pocket, waggling and snagging the edge of his wallet by the stitching. He trembled with revulsion and the desire to grind her palm beneath his heel, feel her knuckles pop from their sockets like greasy eyeballs. He burned so with the insult that when his parents asked him to shower and dress up for fancy dinner with their friends he felt like he'd go up in flames.

At first, he only stared hard at his mother. Surely she would come to his rescue... Surely she knew how he felt... But she was reading and didn't feel his fury, although he waited, holding himself completely still, a pillar of icy fire.

"I don't want to go anywhere," he said, finally, trying to make his words cut like swords. His mother looked up.

"I don't want to go anywhere tonight," he repeated, letting his eyes burn holes through her chest.

The father lowered his paper, pondered the boy, pondered the mother. "What's going on here?"

"I want to stay in the room."

"Why?"

"Because."

"That is not an answer," said the father, snapping the newsprint and spreading it smooth. He was sitting in the flowery hotel room easy chair and had his feet in his shoes on the bed.

"I just want to stay here," said the boy stubbornly.

"Why?"

"Because I'm tired." He tried another tack. "Please," he pleaded, "can't I stay here?"

"No," said the father.

"I'm not a baby," the boy said, changing his tone again. "I happen to know what's good for me."

"Babies are egocentric," the father answered coolly. "They strive to self-serve; precisely what you appear to be doing."

"Pace," said the mother, swishing between them, patting everything back into place. "It's one of the oldest restaurants in town. It used to be a dining club for men and only began allowing women three years ago." She held up the guidebook she'd been reading and rattled it. "It says here that each supper party has it's own private room with a bar and a fireplace."

The boy mouthed "So what?" to the mother who wasn't looking.

"But more important than sight-seeing," said the father, letting his voice grow large, "is the fact that we'll be doing something together. We're a long way from home and I've been busy all day and I'd like to spend the evening with my two most favorite people." He looked at the son and the mother brightly. "You can tell me all about your adventures."

The boy ground his teeth. At any moment he would explode. "What difference will it make if I'm there or not?" he sputtered. "You'll just end up ignoring the baby, like always, when you're with your friends."

The father looked hard at his son, but there was no anger. "Do I do that? I'm sorry," he said slowly. "And I didn't mean to imply that you were a baby. I was only replying to your argument. On the contrary, the fact that you're no longer a baby explains why you're along on this trip. You're quite old enough now to enjoy the museums, the food, to join in the conversation at dinner. At home, you know I like to hear what you have to say."

"Well, if dragging me out makes you feel better..." the boy sneered with an impotence that made his eyes swell with tears.

"Pace," said the mother softly.

But the boy was just getting going. "Maybe, just maybe I don't feel like it. Maybe I don't want to be old enough. I don't even speak Spanish! How do you expect me to join in the conversation when I don't speak the lingo? Huh? Remember, you wouldn't let me take Spanish: you said French was the language of culture. But that doesn't matter because what you really want to do is take me out and show me off to all your friends... like a pet... like a pet prize." He was almost spitting. "Meet the next-in-line; so well-behaved, so charming, so bookish; going to Harvard soon, if I can get him in..."

"Pace."

Pace was losing his balance; he was tumbling headfirst into a hot dark hole. "I'm tired of being bookish and well-behaved. I'm tired of pretending to be the way you've made me. I don't want to be old enough. I don't want to be what you want me to be...!"

"Pace." This time the mother's voice stopped the boy. She walked slowly between her husband and her son and held out her hands: "You see, darling," she said to the father, "he was robbed this afternoon... Perhaps..."

"Robbed? How?" There was both concern and excitement in the father's voice. There was also relief.

The boy was having none of it. He clenched his teeth and glared at the soles of the father's shoes. Not now. Not now. He wanted to keep falling. He wanted to splinter into a million jagged pieces. This argument would not end with a description of his humiliation.

But the mother didn't expect him to explain himself. She said: "An old woman, apparently, was the culprit. She pretended to help clean something off his jacket and then, behold, his wallet was missing."

There was a pause.

"Where were you?" asked the father, looking at the mother.

"I was... He was..." The mother hesitated and the boy's heart swelled with the murmur of her guilt. "Pace was trailing a bit," she admitted.

The family was silent for a long moment, silent with their thoughts—the son glaring at the mother's back, the mother watching the father, the father with a far-off look in his eyes.

"Hah!" the father suddenly laughed out loud, "Hah! Hah!" exploding and shattering the blame and resentment. "Did something fall on your head?" he shouted. "I'll bet it did!" He roared again, slapping his knees.

The boy and the mother stared.

"It's old-as-the-hills that gypsy trick and it takes two connivers." The father jumped out of his chair, the better to show them.

"The one behind spits over the head of the victim, causing the distraction." He leapt forward and pretended to send a spray of spit over the head of the mother; clearly it would have landed all over the son. "Now," he said, "the one in front turns around, consoles, cleans up the fictitious mess and steals the wallet." He ran around to the son, tapped at him with a pretend handkerchief, then made an elaborate grab for the boy's pocket and held up the invisible wallet, waving it back and forth. "Hah!" he laughed again. "Hah, hah! Really, it's something of a honor to have been robbed in that way, my boy. They've probably been using the

same maneuver since the time of Our Lord Jesus Christ." He sat back down, panting slightly, lifting his legs and crossing his feet.

"Absolutely dazzling," he chuckled. "Completely fantabulous." The father half raised the paper once again.

He must have stolen one last look at his young son's face though, seen that it was falling apart, dissolving, since he slid his feet off the bed and added gently, "I'm sorry, son. It's okay. You can stay here tonight. It's okay. Did you lose a lot?"

But all the boy could think to say was, "Spit?"

Chapter 3

New chapter

Walter Pace Clover III, named after his father and his grandfather before him, stood in the shadow of the velvet curtain and observed the swirling dancers. Somewhere near the center of the pattern was the girl whose eyes, he'd told her, were sunlit forest pools where thoughts swam like golden fishes. She would be wearing white—she would always wear white—and her forehead was an ivory palace with large, white, beautiful rooms, one opening from another, out and out, forever. He had told her this too, and believed it himself. Once they'd sat together on a couch and she was so beautiful he had to kiss her. He'd told her stories all night, even the one about the frogs that left little babies under the burdock leaves, and they'd promised each other all this world and the next one too. But he'd been wrong. She was beautiful, but the beauty was all about surfaces. Behind the smiling lips and eyes there were no thoughts like goldfish, no beautifully furnished convictions. He turned away from the dance with both sadness and calm and began to undress slowly, laying each piece of clothing in order of its removal on the chair next to the bed, then inserting himself under the blankets like a knife into its sheath. Straight and cool and motionless with his head between two enormous pillows, the sounds of the room and the rooms beyond filled his senses—the air-conditioner, the fans, the water falling and rising and rushing around corners, windows opening and doors clicking shut; one engine winding down and another grinding on as if the hotel were breathing air, pumping blood, churning guts. Pace closed his eyes and put his fingers in his ears, listening hard for passing of his own time.

Chapter 4

New chapter

"Did you do any reading last night?"

"No."

"Don't you have final exams coming up soon?"

"No."

"Doesn't school let out next month?"

"Yes."

Dropped by a taxi a few blocks from the city marketplace, father and son were ambling. Whenever his father wanted a bonding experience, they went for an amble. Swagger was more like it, thought Pace, who despised the ritual.

"You would have enjoyed dinner last night." Mister Clover spoke in a voice oozing chattiness. "We had twin waiters attending us. Identical twins. One wore a white carnation, and the other a red one. Really, it was rather eerie."

Pace said nothing. He didn't feel like being friendly. He didn't feel like being interested. The truth was, he felt a little sick, a little feverish, a little sore-throaty this morning. He wished he were home, in bed, alone, both his parents gone off to work. But, no.

Here he was with this fatherly peacock, strutting down the middle of a busy sidewalk. Pace could feel the pedestrian's irritation building up behind them like an angry wave.

"Are you prepared for the exams?" Unable to interest his son in the weirdly foreign, the father returned to business-as-usual. "If you want to go to Saint Alban's next year, it can all hinge on those scores."

"I'm as prepared as you and nine years of private instruction can make me," Pace answered impertinately. He was having to dance around at his father's side to avoid touching the people pushing to get around them. Pace didn't have any money on him this morning, but he kept his hands jammed down inside his front pockets, just in case, and that put him off balance.

“Education is what makes us civilized,” the father recited.

“And private education makes us what, Dad?”

Walter Clover placed his hand on his son’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Pace jumped and searched his father’s face, but Mister Clover wasn’t angry, no, he was beaming at a table covered with huge glass urns of candy-colored juices.

“I’m glad we got this time together,” he said, nodding at the juices, moving on, ignoring his son’s prickly question. “Now don’t those have just the same shape as Egyptian canopic jars?” He paused to point out a display of pink and blue striped water jugs, laughing and wagging his head at the wonder of it all. “Isn’t it delightful? Not only globalization in the form of materials—they needn’t carry their water in heavy clay—but globalization of cultural values as well. Aesthetics. A thing of beauty is a thing of beauty, no matter what its original use.” He ambled on, but the lecture continued. “Why, just think of it, son, the very notion that ordinary life needn’t be filled with ordinary ugly items. Simple things of beauty is a cultural import, don’t you agree?”

Pace didn’t know if he agreed or not, but it didn’t really matter: his father had always liked to talk more than listen and the questions were just for show.

Straight ahead of them, through a vast garden of cut flowers, loomed the dome of the market entrance. His father walked toward it, pontificating, while Pace followed, listening and not listening. To pontificate means to speak like a pope, except that his dad was wearing a red cap, and that was what cardinals wore...

Something happened then.

Something tickled him, or tripped him, or maybe it was the tiniest piece of volcanic glass that fastened to the liquid in his eye and began to swim and scar, but suddenly, to Pace, his dad was comical and stupid, ridiculous, and he couldn’t help himself: he began to trot and waddle and grin like a dumb tubby monk following his bumptious master.

The temperature sank as they dropped down a flight of stairs into the market interior, vast as a cathedral and just as gloomy. Pace crossed himself, praising his good fortune, and toddled after the cardinal down the first aisle of onions and zucchinis, past great wads of carrots knotted by the hair, tomatoes and apples stacked in wide pyramids. There was an aisle for dried beans and one for chilies, and off the aisles were dozens of small chapel-like spaces displaying cooking herbs, baking spices, dark honey in wine bottles and tall spools of sugar so raw it was nearly black. At the very end of the aisle, where all of the aisles ended, there was a

great light-filled nave devoted to creams, butters and other milky products. The vendors sat on high stools, chanting their concoctions of cheese wrapped in banana leaves or cheese wrapped in what looked like old socks, or gobs of cheese floating in clear liquid inside plastic bags.

Pace trailed vaguely after his father who still strutted and nodded where the harvest met with his approval. Yes, Mister Cardinal Clover pokes his finger at a baggie of cream, sniffs at the butter that isn't yellow, but never, not once, does he bother to notice whether his monk is attentive or not.

Bored by the play-acting and feeling sick again with the smells, Pace devised another entertainment, a better one, more exciting... dangerous... He would be a spy! A spy in the Vatican of Food.

The object was to maintain visual contact with the target—Cardinal Clover—while at the same time conducting reconnaissance for an ultimate ambush. Pace stood stock still in the middle of the aisle and willed his father to look at him—it was only right to give the old man a fair chance—and after counting to ten, he slowly sank to a crouch behind a basket. He could still see his father, leaning intently over a table of chilies, but he knew that at this point his father would only find him if all along he'd been paying attention. Even so, the boy thought, never underestimate the enemy was the first order of war.

Pace's father, unaware, turned and with his hands clasped behind his back, swaggered off.

Game on.

For a time the spy was forced to merely tail his prey, waiting for him to choose one of the four aisles leading back to the center of the market. Once the prey had made his choice—the third aisle—the spy slipped quickly down the second aisle to recon the forward territory. The four major aisles led to a wide crossing with the main entrance/exit stairs on either side. The crossing, being a kind of thoroughfare, teemed with women and children and baskets and all matter of this and that—tiny mounds of peanuts, dried shrimp, little grass nests with speckled eggs, raspberries threaded through a reed and tied like a necklace, oranges the size of grapes and lemons the size of coconuts—but Pace quickly determined that the aisles on the other side of the crossing were all dedicated to fish and seafood. Darting back down outside aisle, parallel to his dad, the boy caught an odd glimpse of the old man looking straight up into the rafters. Pace didn't stay to find out—he had more scouting to do and he returned to the crossing and headed up the right-hand stairs.

The sunlight dazzled him. And it was hot. And there was a noise like bees.

For it was bees.

Thousands, billions of bees swarming over low tables of gooey fruit and the women who sold it. On the women's arms, hair, cheeks—the bees were everywhere—on their flowery aprons, their bare brown feet. For a moment, Pace felt distress. Not that he was allergic. No. It was the surprise. No, it was the horror of the insect world so at home within the human.

Unable to take another step forward, Pace backed to the edge of the stairs, turned around, and fled inside. Straight back down the outside aisle he ran, around the corner through the cheeses, and, slowing now, up the row where he'd last seen his father.

He stood still. His heart was pounding. He wiped the sweat away from his eyes.

Where was his dad?

The crowd pushed up behind him, parted, flowed forward. It wasn't a sea of people, it was a river; a sluggish, mostly brown river of uniform surface. In other words, there was no tall man in a red cap. No Cardinal Clover. No target. No prey. No dad.

Not to worry. A momentary setback of spycraft and easily remedied. Pace cautiously but swiftly passed from shore to shore, back and forth across the aisle until he reached the crossing, crossed it, then a quick check of rows one, two, three... and there—ahah!—was the man in the red cap, the Prince of the Church among the fishes.

If the master takes the high road, the squirt will take the low, and Pace chose the aisle marked Mariscos, which sounded like a good name for a girl.

But what an museum of the weird! How could anyone take this stuff home for dinner? Pink, purple, blue, blistered, hairy, pimpled, puckered, gray and glistening with ooze. He stopped to watch a pretty lady speak to a vender, her voice sweeter than any of these slimy creatures deserved. The vender smiled and scooped a mess of white snotty-looking stuff into a plastic bag, giving it a quick twist and a knot. The lady paid him with more songbird notes, then turned and walked away. Out of her back, a fat baby was growing, fully formed.

Pace shook himself; he was losing his concentration, falling down on the job. Kicking up his heels, he scooted to the end of the aisle and took a sniff, left and right. No dad. He peeked down the next row, then stared in disbelief: his dad wasn't there either.

How could he have gotten through the fish that fast? Pace jumped over to the next and last aisle, and, still cautious, peeked again. Still no dad. Confused and a little alarmed, he turned in a circle. What to do?

Be logical, he thought. Dad was always logical.

Pace turned and began back along the rows, not bothering to hide himself much, and when he got to the wall, he retraced, although it was obvious that his father wasn't walking in any one of them. Logically, his dad wouldn't have gone back to the vegetable and cheese side as he'd already been there, so that left only the outdoor markets, left and right. Since he'd been in the fish aisles closest to the right exit, it made sense he'd go that way.

Pace ran down through the fish and up the stairs, once again blinded by the sunlight at the top. Shading his eyes with both hands, he took stock. No bees on this side at least, but plenty of flowers. This was the way they'd come into the market. Since the vender booths were about chest high, Pace found that it was possible to see through several layers of corridors and he ran up and down and through the maze, jumping up whenever the mounds of blooms were too high. Finally, finally, he spotted his father, walking very slowly, still nodding his head.

Taking advantage of an alley, Pace got within one corridor of his dad and slowed his steps to match, at once realizing how fast his heart was beating, how really frightened he'd been. He was sweating all over too. And his face felt swollen. Even his eyeballs burned.

And that got him to thinking: Why hadn't his dad noticed that he wasn't around? Why did his dad care so little what happened to him?

He knew what the answer was; it was just like those questions his dad asked for show: It's not that I don't care, son, but you're old enough to handle the consequences of inattention. If you're going to play the game, then be the winner.

He was right. If Pace had wanted to look at stuff, then he should have stuck to his father's side. He'd chosen to compete and then he'd let himself get distracted. It wouldn't happen again.

That his dad hadn't seemed to notice his absence wasn't much of an incentive for an ambush, but there had to be an end to the play and bushwhack was it. Pace decided that he would appear suddenly, ahead of his father, nonchalantly leaning on a booth, maybe picking his teeth or eating a strange fruit. But the flower market wasn't a good place to hide—too wide-open, too easy. Soon enough his dad meandered into another covered marketplace and the going got tough as the vender booths were like small shops and it wasn't possible to see into the different

aisles. Pace was forced back into trailing mode, stepping neatly into the spaces occupied by his father only moments before—candles, tin pots, leather sandals—the problem was, how to get around him without being seen.

And then it came to him. It was brilliantly simple. As the great Chinese master Sun Tzu said, Speed is the essence of war. All he had to do was get as close as possible to the target, wait until he was occupied in the inspection of supplies, and outflank him, fast. Then it was just a matter of waiting for the enemy to walk into the trap.

Pace moved in, hiding behind a hanging column of baskets, then a tower of buckets, then more baskets. Finally, his dad became absorbed at a counter, appeared even to be bargaining with the merchant, and Pace made his move. Flattening himself against the far stalls, he flew like a bat—flicker and flat, flicker and flat—until he reached the end of the corridor. Safe. Now, for the prop. He ran his eyes over the assortment of merchandise at hand: shoes, more baskets, painted clay pots. Nothing spoke to him. He'd have to use action, then, to display his heroism. He'd wait until his father approached the corner, then he, Pace, would walk out, practically run into him, Oops! he'd say. Hello there! What a riot.

Unwillingly to risk detection after such careful planning, Pace maintained cover and kept a lookout on the ground, waiting for approaching pant legs. There they were! He bounded out—a little too eagerly—getting himself all tangled up. “Oops,” he said, then laughed and looked up into his dad's face.

Except that it wasn't his dad. The man was tall and wore a red cap. He was a foreigner, but he wasn't his dad.

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