



GAYLE ROPER

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Sand

A Seaside Mystery



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MULTNOMAH  
BOOKS

SHADOWS ON THE SAND  
PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS  
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-1-60142-084-8  
ISBN 978-1-60142-306-1 (electronic)

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Cover design: Kelly L. Howard  
Cover photography: Pam Ullman/Getty

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Roper, Gayle G.

Shadows on the sand : a seaside mystery / Gayle Roper. — 1st ed.  
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-60142-084-8 — ISBN 978-1-60142-306-1 (ebk.) 1. City and town life—New Jersey—Fiction. 2. Missing persons—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3568.O68S53 2011  
813'.54—dc22

2011003832

Printed in the United States of America  
2011—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“The usual?” I asked, my voice oh-so-casual.

He gave a nod, barely glancing my way, and opened his copy of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. *The Press of Atlantic City* waited.

I turned to place his order, but there was no need. Lindsay, my sister, partner, and the café’s baker, had been listening to Andi’s story through the serving window. She waved her acknowledgment before I said a word. She passed the order to Ricky, our short-order cook, who had stayed with us longer than I expected, long enough that he had become almost as much of an asset to Carrie’s as Lindsay was.

My sister gave me a sly smile, then called, “Hi, Greg.”

He looked up from his paper and gave Lindsay a very nice smile, far nicer than he ever gave me.

“The sticky buns are all gone,” he said in mild accusation, nodding toward the glass case where we kept Lindsay’s masterpieces.

She grinned. “Sorry. You’ve got to get here earlier.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Or you could make more.”

“I’ll take the suggestion under advisement,” she said agreeably.

“Haven’t you heard the adage about making your customers happy?”

“Yeah. So?”

He laughed and turned a page in the paper. I brought him a glass of OJ and a cup of my special blend.

“How’re you doing?” I asked, just as I did every morning.

He gave me a vague smile. “Fine.” Just as he said every morning.

But he wasn’t. Oh, he was better than, say, a year ago, definitely better than two years ago, but he wasn’t well. Even three years after the tragedy that had altered his life, he was far from his self-proclaimed fine. If you looked closely—as I did—you could see the strain never completely left his eyes, and the purple stains under them were too deep and dark, a sure sign that a good night’s sleep was still little more than a vague memory for him.

But he was sober. More than two years and counting.

“Keep talking, Andi,” Lindsay said as Ricky beat Greg’s eggs and inserted his wheat bread in the toaster. “This is better than reality TV. It’s really real.” She walked out of the kitchen into the café proper. “Bill bopped Jase,” she prompted.

“Our Jase,” I clarified.

Greg looked up. “Your dishwasher?”

I nodded.

“Hmm.” And he went back to his paper.

“And Jase went down for the count.” Andi’s chest swelled with pride at her beloved’s prowess.

I flinched. “Don’t you think knocking a guy out for talking to you is a bit much?”

Andi thought for almost half a second, then shook her head. “It wasn’t for just Saturday. He knows Jase and I work together, and he was staking his claim.”

I’d seen Jase and Andi talking in the kitchen, but there never seemed to be any romantic overtones. “Jase is a nice guy and a good worker. I don’t want to lose him because of your boyfriend.”

“He is, and I don’t want him to go either,” Andi agreed. “I like talking to him.”

“Me too.” Lindsay rested an elbow on the counter and propped her chin in her palm. “I think he’s sad.”

“What do you mean, sad?” But I’d sensed he was weighed down with something too.

“He’s funny and open most of the time,” Lindsay said, “but sometimes when no one’s talking to him, I see this look of sorrow on his face.”

I nodded. “All the more reason to hate that he got punched.”

“Yeah.” Lindsay got a dreamy look in her dark brown eyes. “But there’s something about a guy defending you, even if what he’s defending you from isn’t really a threat.” She sighed.

“Lindsay!” I was appalled. “Get a grip.” Though if Greg ever wanted to defend me, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t mind. Of course, that presupposed he’d notice I was in trouble. I glanced at him bent over his paper. Not likely to happen. I bit back a sigh.

“Tell me, Andi. Does Bill plan to punch out any male who talks to you?”

“Come on, Carrie,” Andi said. “Don’t be mad at Bill. You know how guys can be when they’ve had a few beers.”

I did know how guys could be, beers or no beers. “What were you doing at a party where there was drinking?”

She became all prim and prissy. “I did not drink.”

“I should hope not, but you shouldn’t have been there.” Good grief. I was sounding more and more like her mother—or how her mother would have sounded if she weren’t missing in action somewhere. Part of that history I didn’t know.

“Order up,” Ricky announced as he walked to the pass-through. “The food is never better than when I plate it.”

You’d have thought he was Emeril or Wolfgang Puck or one of Paula Deen’s sons, not a stopgap cook who couldn’t find any other job after graduating from college with a psychology degree and who stayed around because he had a crush on the baker.

I grabbed Greg’s scrambled eggs and wheat toast and served them. He accepted them with a nod and a grunt.

“So what happened to Jase?” I asked Andi. I found myself hoping Bill had bruised a knuckle or two in his violence, though I was pretty sure it

meant I was a terrible person too. I didn't wish for a broken hand or anything that extreme, just something to remind him that punching wasn't the way to handle a perceived rival.

Andi waved her hand vaguely. "Bill and a buddy carried Jase to his car. They only dropped him once."

I imagined the *thunk* of poor Jase's head hitting the ground and flinched in sympathy. No such thought bothered Andi. She was too busy being thrilled by Bill, who rode in like her shining knight, laying waste to the enemy with knuckles instead of the more traditional lance.

"How much older than you is Bill?" Lindsay asked.

*Good question, Linds.*

Andi studied the cuticle of her index finger. "He's nineteen."

Lindsay and I exchanged a glance. Those three years from sixteen to nineteen were huge.

I couldn't keep quiet. "So he shouldn't have been drinking at this party either."

Andi slid off her stool. If looks killed, Lindsay'd be sprinkling my ashes in the ocean tomorrow morning.

"What does Clooney think of you and Bill?" Lindsay asked. Clooney was Andi's great-uncle, and she lived with him.

Andi cleared her throat. "We don't talk about Bill."

"Does he know about Bill?" Lindsay's concern was obvious.

Andi stared through long bangs that hung over her hazel eyes. The silky hair sometimes caught in her lashes in a way that made me blink but didn't seem to bother her. "Of course Clooney knows. Do you think I'd keep a secret from him?"

"I didn't think you would." Lindsay smiled. "I'm glad to know I was right."

So was I. Sixteen could go in so many different directions, and I'd hate for this pixie to make wrong choices—or more wrong choices.

“Is he going to college?” I asked. “Bill?”

“He was, but not now.” Her fingernail became even more absorbing. “He dropped out of Rutgers at the end of his freshman year.”

Uh-oh. Dropped out or failed out? “Does he plan to go back? Try again?”

She shrugged. “He doesn't know. Right now he's happy just being. And going to parties. And taking me.” By the time she was finished, she was bouncing at the excitement of it all, her strawberry blond ponytail leaping about her shoulders.

Greg looked up from his newspaper. “So this guy took you, a very underage girl, to a party where there was lots of drinking?”

Andi looked at him, eyes wide, acting as if he'd missed the whole point of her story. “Don't worry about me, Mr. Barnes. Or any of you.” She included Lindsay and me with a nod of her head. “I can handle any problems that might develop at a party. Believe me, I've dealt with far worse.”

I was intrigued. I'd stared down plenty of problems in my time too, and I wondered how her stare downs compared to mine.

She grinned and waved a hand as if she were wiping away her momentary seriousness. “But I'd rather talk about how great Bill is.”

“So how great is he?” Lindsay asked. “Tell me all.” At twenty-seven, she was an incurable romantic. I wasn't sure how this had come to pass, since she had every reason to be as cynical as I, but there you are.

I frowned at her. “Stop encouraging the girl.”

Lindsay just grinned.

I looked at Andi's happy face and had to smile too. “So what's this wonderful guy doing if he's not in school?” Besides being and partying.



“Uh, you mean like a job or something?”

“Yeah.” Lindsay and I exchanged another glance. Greg looked up again at Andi’s reluctant tone.

“Well, he was a lifeguard over the summer. He’s got this fabulous tan, and it makes him so handsome.”

Soul mate stuff if I ever heard it. I half expected her to swoon like a nineteenth-century Southern belle with her stays laced too tightly. “What about now? Postseason?”

“And he was the quarterback on the high school football team two years ago when they won the state championship.”

“Very impressive. What about now?”

“He was named Most Valuable Player.”

“Even more impressive. What about now?”

She began making sure the little stacks of sugar and sweetener packets in the holders on the counter were straight. “Right now he’s just trying to figure it all out.”

Being. Figuring. And punching guys out while he thought. “You mean he’s trying to decide what he wants to be when he grows up?”

She glared at me. In her mind he was grown up. She turned her back with a little sniff and went to clean off a dirty table.

Lindsay swallowed a laugh. “Your sarcastic streak is showing, Carrie.”

Mr. Perkins, another regular at Carrie’s Café and at eighty in better health than the rest of us put together, rapped his cup on the pink marble counter. He’d been sitting for several minutes with his eyes wide behind his glasses as he listened to Andi.

“No daughter of mine that age would ever have gone to a party where there was drinking,” he said. “It’s just flat out wrong.”

Since I agreed, I didn’t mention that he was a lifelong bachelor and had no daughters.

He rapped his cup again.

“Refill?” I asked, not because I didn’t know the answer but because the old man liked to think he was calling the shots.

He nodded. “Regular too. None of that wimpy decaf. I got to keep my blood flowing, keep it pumping.”

I smiled with affection as I topped off his cup. He gave the same line every day. “Mr. Perkins, you have more energy than people half your age.”

He pointed his dripping spoon at me. “And don’t you forget it.”

“Watch it,” I said in a mock scold. “You’re getting coffee all over my counter.”

“And a fine counter it is.” He patted the pink-veined marble slab. It was way too classy and way too pricey for a place like the café. “Did I ever tell you that I remember when it was the registration counter at Seaside’s Grand Hotel? And let me tell you, it was a grand hotel in every sense of the word. People used to come from as far as Pittsburgh, even the president of U.S. Steel. Too bad it burned down. The hotel, not U.S. Steel.”

“Too bad,” I agreed. And yes, he’d told us the story many times.

“It was in 1943,” he said with a faraway look in his eyes. “I was thirteen.” He blinked back to the present. “It was during World War II, you know, and people said it was sabotage. Not that I ever believed that. I mean, why would the Germans burn down a resort hotel? But I’ll tell you, my father, who was an air-raid warden, about had a seizure.”

“I bet he was convinced that the flames, visible for miles up and down the coast, would bring the German subs patrolling offshore right up on our beaches,” Lindsay said with a straight face. “They might have attacked us.”

I glared at her as she repeated word for word Mr. Perkins’s line from the story. She winked unrepentantly.

Mr. Perkins nodded, delighted she was listening. “People kept their curtains drawn at night, and even the boardwalk was blacked out for the

duration, the lights all covered except for the tiniest slit on the land side, so the flames from the fire seemed extra bright. All that wood, you know. *Voom!*” He threw his hands up in the air.

Lindsay and I shook our heads at the imagined devastation, and I thought I saw Greg’s lips twitch. He’d heard the story almost as many times as we had.

Mr. Perkins stirred his coffee. “After the war some investor bought the property.”

“I bet all that remained of the Grand was the little corner where the pink marble registration counter sat.” Lindsay pointed where I leaned. “That counter.”

Again she spoke his line with a straight face, and this time Greg definitely bit back a grin.

Mr. Perkins added another pink packet to his coffee. “That’s right. The buyer decided to open a restaurant around the counter and build a smaller, more practical hotel on the rest of the property.”

Even that hotel was gone now, replaced many years ago by private homes rented each summer to pay the exorbitant taxes on resort property.

I walked to Greg with my coffeepot. “Refill?”

He slid his mug in my direction, eyes never leaving his paper.

*Be still my heart.*

The café door opened again, and Clooney sauntered in. In my opinion Clooney sauntered through life, doing as little as possible and appearing content that way. I, on the other hand, was a bona fide over-achiever, always trying to prove myself, though I wasn't sure to whom. If Clooney weren't so charming, I'd have disliked him on principle. As it was, I liked him a lot.

Today he wore a Phillies cap, one celebrating the 2008 World Series victory. His gray ponytail was pulled through the back of the cap and hung to his shoulder blades.

"You work too hard, Carrie," he told me frequently. "You'll give yourself indigestion or reflux or a heart attack or something. You need to take time off."

"If I didn't want to pay the rent or have insurance or eat, I'd do that very thing," I always countered.

"What you need is a rich husband." And he'd grin.

"A solution to which I'm not averse. There just seems to be a shortage of candidates in Seaside."

"Hey, Clooney," Andi called from booth four, where she was clearing. She gave him a little finger wave. Clooney might be her great-uncle, but try as I might, I couldn't get her to call him Uncle Clooney. Just "Clooney" sounded disrespectful to me, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Hey, darlin'." Clooney walked over to Andi and gave her a hug. Then he came to the counter and slid onto the stool next to Greg. He did not take off his cap, something that drove me crazy. I've developed this manners

thing, probably because my childhood was so devoid of anything resembling pattern or politeness. I know people thought me prissy and old-fashioned, but I am what I am, a poor man's Miss Manners.

Clooney pointed at a muffin, and I placed one on a dish for him. He broke off a chunk, then glanced back at Andi. "She tell you about that fool Bill?"

I grinned at his disgruntled expression. "She did."

"What is it with girl children?" he demanded. "I swear she's texted the news around the world."

"She thinks it's a compliment—her knight defending her."

Clooney and Greg snorted at the same time.

"Slaying a dragon who's threatening the life of the fair damsel's one thing," Greg said, actually looking at me. "Decking a kid for saying hi to a pretty girl is another."

"Your past life as a cop is showing," I teased.

He shrugged as he turned another page of the paper. "Old habits die hard."

The door opened again, and in strutted the object of our conversation. I knew it had to be him because, aside from the fact that he looked like a very tanned football player, he and Andi gazed at each other with love-struck goofy grins. I thought I heard Lindsay sigh.

Andi hurried toward the kitchen with an armful of dirty dishes from booth four. She squeaked in delight as Bill swatted her on the rump as she passed. Clooney stiffened at this unseemly familiarity with his baby. Mr. Perkins tsk-tsked his disapproval.

"Can I have breakfast now?" Andi asked when she reappeared empty-handed.

The wait staff usually ate around ten thirty at a back booth, and it was

ten fifteen. We were in the off-season weekday lull between breakfast and lunch, and the three men on their stools were the only customers present. I nodded.

Bill looked toward the kitchen. He appeared overwhelmed at the prospect of food, unable to make a selection. He draped an arm over Andi's shoulder as he considered the possibilities, and she snuggled against him. Clooney's frown intensified.

Bill was a big guy, and it was clear by the way he carried himself that he still thought of himself as the big man on campus in spite of the fact that he was now campusless and unemployed. As I studied him, I wondered if high school football would end up being the high point of his life. How sad that would be. Clooney drifted through life by choice. I hoped Bill wouldn't drift for lack of a better plan or enough ability to achieve.

*Careful, Carrie.* I was being hard on this kid. Nineteen and undecided wasn't that unusual. Just because at his age I'd already been on my own for three years, responsible for Lindsay, who was six years my junior. . .

Bill gave Clooney, who was watching him with a rather sour look, a sharp elbow in the upper arm and asked, one guy to another, "What do you suggest, Clooney? What's really good here?"

Clooney's relaxed slouch disappeared. I saw the long-ago medal-winning soldier of his Vietnam days. "You will call me 'sir' until I give you permission to call me by name. Do you understand, *boy?*"

Bill blinked. So did I. Everyone in Seaside, no matter their age, called him Clooney.

"Stop that, Clooney!" Andi was appalled at her uncle's tone of voice.

"Play nice," I said softly as I realized for the first time that I didn't know whether Clooney was his first name or last. I made a mental note to ask Greg. As a former Seaside cop, he might know.

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T, darlin’.” Clooney gave Andi an easy smile. He gave Bill a hard stare. “Right, Bill?”

Bill blinked again. “Y-yes, sir.”

Andi took her beloved’s hand and dragged him toward the back booth. “Ignore my uncle. He’s having a bad day.” She glared over her shoulder at Clooney, who grinned back at her.

“She’s got spunk, that one,” he said with pride.

“How’d she end up living with you?” I’d been longing to ask ever since Clooney showed up with Andi just before Labor Day and asked me to give her a job. I did, and I guess I thought that gave me the right to ask my question.

Clooney disagreed because he said, “I think I’ll have one of your amazing Belgian waffles with a side of sausage.”

“I’m on it.” Lindsay headed back to the kitchen before I said a word. “Got it, Ricky?”

“Got it.” Ricky tested the waffle iron with a flick of water. He smiled as the water jumped and evaporated. He was a handsome kid with dark Latino looks of the smoldering kind, a young Antonio Banderas. Unfortunately for him, his smoldering looks appeared to have no effect on Linds.

Another victim of unrequited love.

Andi came to the counter and placed an order for Bill and herself. I blinked. We could have served the whole dining room on less.

Mr. Perkins eyed me. “Are you going to make him pay for all that? You should, you know.”

True, but I shook my head. “Job perk. He’s cheaper than providing health benefits and not nearly as frustrating.”

“So say you.” Clooney settled to his waffle and sausage.

I watched the parade of laden plates emerge from the kitchen and make

their way to the back booth, making me reconsider the “cheaper” bit. Andi took her seat and stared at Bill as if he could do no wrong in spite of the fact that he leaned on the table like he couldn’t support his own weight. Didn’t anyone ever tell the kid that his noneating hand was supposed to rest in his lap, not circle his plate as if protecting it from famished marauders or little girls with ponytails?

“Look at him,” Clooney said. “He’s what? Six-two and over two hundred pounds? Jase Peoples is about five-eight and one-forty if he’s wearing everything in his closet.”

“Let’s forget about Jase, shall we?” Andi’s voice was sharp as she came to the counter and reached for more muffins. “The subject is closed.”

I grabbed her wrist. “No more muffins. We need them for paying customers. If Bill’s still hungry, he can have toast.”

“Or he could pay.” To Mr. Perkins a good idea was worth repeating.

Andi laughed at the absurdity of such a thought.

Ricky had left his stove and was leaning on the pass-through beside Lindsay. “Four slices coming up for Billingsley.”

“Billingsley?” I looked at the big guy as he downed the last of his four-egg ham-and-cheese omelet. With a name like that, it was a good thing he was big enough to protect himself.

“Billingsley Morton Lindemuth III,” Ricky said.

“I should never have told you.” Andi clearly felt betrayed.

“But you did. And you got to love it.” Laughing, Ricky turned to make toast.

“He hates it,” Andi said.

I wasn’t surprised.

Greg drew in a breath like you do when something terrible happens. We all turned to stare at him.



“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He was looking at the front page of *The Press of Atlantic City*. “Jase Peoples.”

“What?” I demanded.

Clooney grabbed the paper and followed Greg’s pointing finger.

I could see the picture and the headline above it: “Have You Seen This Man?”