

SHELLEY

Shelley looked up from her desk as the door to the rental office opened. A young woman stood in a shaft of white light. She was petite, but had an air of authority about her and she stepped in and closed the door behind her. The shaded office was empty except for Shelley's overloaded desk, a full to overflowing brochure rack on the wall and a couple of low tables and square-shaped aqua chairs with metal frames left over from the 1960s.

"Hi, my name is Carrie and I am looking for an efficiency to rent. Got anything?" she asked. Shelley immediately thought of the El Dorado, a motel that had been converted to condos in 2002, just before the real estate market had turned sour. It had been tough going in Florida real estate since then with some up but mostly down years and the El Dorado had suffered. Lately things had been looking up again and there were many new owners who had come in as others had lost their units to bankruptcy and foreclosures.

Although she also represented other properties, Shelley had a special affinity for the El Dorado and knew its offerings well. As a child, her parents had managed the property then known as Shangri-La. Her mother

had cleaned the rooms after guests left and her father was the main caretaker, attending to the myriad of things that come up at a reasonably-priced motel just down the street from a major attraction like The Waves. The Waves drew the celebrities and the wealthy. The Shangri-La drew those who dreamed of being wealthy, but, who, for now, were content to join them at The Waves' beach-side bar to watch the sunset and then return to sleep in their more modest motel rooms.

“How long are you looking to rent?” Shelley asked. It was early June, well before long the rental season would be in full swing and efficiencies would be in high demand. A short rental would mean she'd be left scrambling for a tenant in mid-summer, which always meant a few weeks of lost rental income. “At least a year,” the young woman proclaimed. “I'm a student at Pinellas State and I'm looking for someplace to live outside the dorm. I need to work and I thought it would be easier to land a good paying job in a tourist area like this one. I don't mind the drive to classes and, frankly, I don't mind missing the usual college beer parties.” Gesturing to the street and the beach and condos across the way, she said, “This is really much more my cup of tea.”

“Have you got a job yet?” Shelley asked. “I’ll need a month’s rent in advance and a month’s security, plus some references.” Sometimes that ended the conversation and Shelley watched the expression on the young woman’s face. Carrie didn’t flinch. “I just got a job bartending at the beach bar at The Waves. Don’t worry. The rent and security won’t be a problem. I’ve been working all year at school. If you need references, I’ve got them.”

“Okay, I’ll show you what I’ve got. It’s just a couple of blocks away – between here and The Waves. We can walk.” Shelley got up from behind the desk and grabbed a floppy linen hat from a hook behind the desk.

They approached the El Dorado from the street side. Sometime in the early nineties, the Shangri-La had fallen on hard times. After 40 years, the motel had closed and been empty while the economy churned its way through a recession that always hit tourist areas like Gulf Beach hard as money for second homes and seaside vacations dried up. The wealthy had continued to come though diminished in number and The Waves weathered the storm, but small motels in the area had suffered.

Shelley and her parents were long gone from the Shangri-La when that happened. She’d gone off to college in the late sixties and had vowed she wouldn’t come back. Her parents had worked at the motel until they

were well into their sixties, unplugging stuck drains and cleaning up after sloppy patrons. The motel was still a going concern when they retired, but the owners had changed several times and the new owners were bleeding the place and not making the investments needed to keep a 1950s-era motel operating. Her parents had finally had too much and left to live out their days in a small, cinder block bungalow several streets behind the boulevard which ran along the ocean.

She had not planned to return home, but a failed marriage and a poor job market collided with a freak car accident that left her parents injured and needing her help and she returned. Her father never recovered and died several weeks later of complications from hip surgery. Her mother recovered, but was never the same. She lived out her days in a heavily shaded room with the television blaring. Shelley cared for her mother until she finally succumbed to a bout of pneumonia made worse by lungs weakened from years of smoking. Although she had quit soon after she retired from Shangri-La, the damage had been done.

After her mother died, Shelley stayed. There wasn't a lot to pull her away and a small inheritance from her parents and a house without a mortgage had a certain appeal. Besides its heralded oceanfront, Gulf Beach

was the kind of community where people were friendly, but didn't ask a lot of questions. That was one of the reasons why the famous and the infamous liked to visit and it suited Shelley just fine.

She spent several months after her mother died going through the house, repainting, rearranging and discarding things her parents had held onto for years. She fell into the property management job after a chance encounter at a breakfast diner with a woman she'd grown up with years ago. They had been talking about how Gulf Beach had changed and all the beachfront development that was going on when the woman casually mentioned that one of the property management firms was looking for an office manager.

As she left the diner, Shelley thought maybe that wouldn't be so bad. Now that she had pretty much finished updating the bungalow, she was ready to do something else and that could carry her along until she figured out what she really wanted to do. Besides, she was a natural, having grown up watching her parents catering to Shangri-La patrons and dealing with all the ins and outs of the vacationing public.

Once she knew what to look for, it had been easy to spot the "Officer Manager Wanted" sign in front of the real estate office on Gulf Boulevard.

She parked her car and walked into the dimly lit office. An older woman was seated at the desk. She looked up with tired eyes. Shelley took in the drab surroundings and hesitated, but then burst forth: "I'm here to inquire about the opening on the sign."

There hadn't been much of an interview. The woman handed her an application form and pointed to a chair with a desk arm that looked like it was leftover from some school renovation. It turned out to be handy for walk-ins filling out rental applications. She returned the completed form to the woman who thanked her and said she would give it to the owner when he got back from showing a rental unit to a potential customer. The screen door slammed shut as Shelley left.

Later that afternoon, she got a call from Lou Sheine on her cell phone. He asked her to come back in. The woman at the desk was gone by then. He asked her a few questions about why she was in Gulf Beach, but nothing about what she had done before. Then he asked her how soon she could start.

She started the next day. Never did see the other woman again, but she and Lou Sheine really hit it off. She had a knack for understanding what people wanted when they walked through the door and knew how to

handle the service calls, plumbing backups and insect-sightings that came with managing rental properties on the Gulf Coast. He knew enough to leave her alone and stayed busy managing the improvements he was making to the property. He let her manage the people.

It was a shock when Lou told her he was losing the property and that she'd have to go. The bank that took over was bringing its own crew and would manage the property from the office in Tampa. Fortunately, thanks to her parents' frugality, her house was paid for and she stood by as she watched another round of foreclosures wash over Gulf Beach. It had been that way for as long as she could remember. Periods of booms and busts and all the personal drama that brought. Honestly, that was one of the reasons she had left in the first place. But now she was back with no good place to go.

For a while she retreated into the bungalow, but then decided to take a job at a local furniture consignment shop just to get out of the house. She'd found the place while she was doing her own make over and clearing out her parents' stuff. It was a little like the property management business. People were people after all and she knew both sides – those hitting hard times who had to sell and those on the prowl for some bargains.

Ironically, she was still working for the furniture consignment store when she got the call from Lou telling her he was back at the El Dorado – not as owner or manager, but as a tenant. It was the same day she got the call from the managers at the El Dorado wanting to know if she wanted her old job back. It didn't take her long to decide. There was something about the El Dorado she couldn't say no to—with or without Lou in charge. Within a week she was back.

Shelley looked sideways at Carrie as she opened the door to Unit 103, just two units down from where Lou Sheine was. It was a studio on the ground floor and was one of her favorites because it still had one of the original Murphy beds built into the wall of the combined living-kitchen space. Shelley thought it would be perfect for a college student and it was sometimes hard to rent because most people were looking for the privacy of a separate bedroom. “This one is available. It's small, but the rent will be less and you can walk to The Waves.”

Corey didn't hesitate. She stepped inside and sized up the place quickly, Murphy bed and all. She said, “I'll take it.”