Fence of Earth

 CHAPTER ONE

May 18, 1980

 Maggie spotted him near the artichokes, out of the corner of her eye. She dropped the grapefruit she was holding. He was the man who’d told her that her husband Scott had killed himself. He was ten feet away, down the same aisle. Was it him? She turned away, towards the hanging baskets, and began to examine the difference between the English walnuts in the top basket and the black walnuts in the lower one.

 This man’s hair was completely white. But it had been more than eleven years since she'd seen him. She’d been back in California for almost a year. The man carried himself with the same military grace with which she remembered him from the Oceanside boatyard.

She knew his name. But what was it?

 She wondered how he had recognized her at a distance in those days. Because she was with Scott? Or, after they separated, because she always went to the boat where Scott was living? Or by her chartreuse VW van, or lavishly embroidered bell-bottoms? Or because her long chestnut hair, kept down usually with a headband, was curlier than most? If so he surely wouldn't recognize her now. Her hair was cropped. She was eight months pregnant.

Now he was a foot nearer, by the plums. Her knees were giving way. What was he doing in Monterey? Only the locals shopped at this fruit and vegetable stand. He was four hundred miles north of his home.

A boy of about ten appeared next to him. The man turned towards him, and she could see his profile. The same leathery, suntanned skin, the straight nose, the trim chin now sagging slightly.

 She had always liked him. Though she would never have admitted it then, the fact he was way over thirty and a retired Naval officer had given her a sense of security. He hadn’t seemed to notice their freaky hair. Once he'd called her "the pretty-faced girl." He was always there early in the morning. He used to wave to them, and sometimes stopped to talk. He'd told them a few stories about World War II. He had taken great care of his boat.

 She touched the baskets, steadying herself. She could almost hear his easy voice. The black walnuts were blacker than the English. She picked one up. They were also more bitter.

He hadn’t told her directly. He had informed Scott’s parents that Scott had hung himself. They, in turn, had called her in Michigan. Laying the black phone on its hook, telling her sister Carole, she’d wondered why he was the one who’d told them. How had he known? What did he have to do with it?

One thing for sure. He knew more than she did.

"Grandpop, will you buy us some peaches, too?"

Maggie moved her head just enough to see them walk to the cashier. A woman and a little girl, younger than the boy, joined them. They were leaving. She would not have to reveal herself now, she would not have to speak to him. But could she? She turned a little further towards them.

 A pain seared her heart. No. She could not.

He pocketed his change. The little girl tugged on his arm and pointed to the peaches. The man's gaze followed, and for a split second, Maggie saw him full-face.

 Hank. That was his name.