

Night Tremors

Chapter One

The woman's back arched and her head jerked backwards. Blinds cut shadows across her naked body. She stood splayed, her arms pressed against the wall. Her shoulders shuttered and she twisted towards the window, exposing the man's bald head. His face, a tight grimace that only pain could produce. Well, pain and sex.

Click.

I got the shot I needed. The proof required to trip the adultery clause in the prenup and open the divorce settlement vault. It would be the last one I showed the man's wife, right after the establishing photos of her husband walking into the La Jolla Inn motel room with his mistress.

The adulterer drove a late model, black Cadillac Escalade. He probably liked it because it was a status symbol and a smooth ride. I liked it because it was roomy under the chassis. Plenty of head room when you had to lie under it and shoot pictures up through slanted motel window blinds of cheating hearts, and bodies. My Nikon D7100 got me the shot without a flash lighting up the cool, moonless December sky. It was early evening, but winter and clouds darkened the ancient inn's parking lot.

I crawled on my belly along the asphalt out from under the SUV and stood up. Tiny pebbles and dirt clung to my jeans and dark blue hooded sweatshirt. I tried to brush them off, but the dew in the night air smeared the dirt into grime and stained the clothing. My mind wandered back to my time as a cop. Way back then I'd never envisioned this as a career. A well paid camera jockey, cataloging the weaknesses and bad decisions of others.

A snoop. A Peeping Tom. A private investigator.

I was good at what I did. Maybe the best in San Diego. The stakeout specialist with the steady hands and quick camera finger. I could sit, or stand, or lie and wait forever for people to do what they shouldn't. Then, click, I had their wrongs captured for posterity. Or infamy. I did my job so well that I never talked about it when friends asked what it was like to be a PI.

I swallowed down my introspection and headed across La Jolla Boulevard to the strip mall where I'd left my car. The mall had a Haagen-Dazs ice cream shop. Bright and shiny and full of sweet, creamy sin that went down a lot easier than self analysis. On the drive home, after I'd chomped down the last of a waffle cone topped with two scoops of mint chip, I hit my boss's number on my cell phone.

"You get it?" His voice vibrated the Bluetooth in my ear.

"Hello to you, too."

"I'm with a client." His voice now hushed. "Just give me the news."

"In flagrante."

"You got a knack, Bullet. Print them in the morning, and we'll show them to the client tomorrow afternoon."

Bob Reitzmeyer had dubbed me "Bullet-head" when I was a kid with a military crew cut. I'd listen to his cop stories when my dad brought him home for dinner after their shifts together on the La Jolla Police Department. Thankfully, he'd dropped "head" from the moniker when I graduated from the Ventura Sheriff's Academy and became a cop on the Santa Barbara Police Department. A long time ago.

"Will do."

"Good work. You're turning into a crack peeper. Your pop would be proud."

He hung up, saving me from having to hold my tongue. I doubted my father would have been proud that his son was a "crack peeper."

Dessert already consumed, I was still hungry for dinner. I drove north until I hit La Jolla's restaurant row, Prospect Street. I rolled past towering palm trees, neon and glass edifices with ocean views and an aging cement rectangle sunk below street level with a view of the office building blocking its view of the ocean. Muldoon's Steak House. My former place of employment.

Before my life changed.

Muldoon's was stuck in a 1970's steak house time warp: lit in permanent dusk, redwood slats and brass on the walls, salad bar buffeting an open grill area. It had once been a second home to me. Now it was just a place where I ate dinner a few times a month.

A hostess I didn't know greeted me in the entry.

"Is Turk in tonight?" I asked.

"Mr. Muldoon?" Her voice had a lilt that made sense matched with her big brown eyes.

I nodded.

"No. He may come in later. I'm not sure."

I felt guilty that I was relieved not to have to see my former best friend. Two years ago, Turk had saved my life before I finally saved myself. But I hadn't saved Turk, and he'd paid for my life

with his mobility. A debt I could never repay. He'd been a casualty of a bad decision I'd made in my life. There'd been other bad decisions.

And other casualties.

I'd just pushed my empty dinner plate away when a shadow crept across my table. I raised my eyes and saw an old piece of Texas in a tailored western style suit wedged up under a cowboy hat.

"Mr. Cahill." The twang in his voice had been muted by years under the Southern California sun but it still had some Lone Star state left in it.

When I first met Timothy Buckley his wardrobe looked like it had been piecemealed together by Goodwill. He'd spent his time shaking hookers and junkies loose from the legal system on the ugly side of San Diego. Now he hung his shingle in La Jolla, a jagged slice of paradise cut along the coast. The closest he got to hookers and junkies was protecting trust fund babes from "Girls Gone Wild" videos and their silver spoon brothers from DUI charges.

"I think we're past Misters, Buckley. You can call me Rick."

"Well, there it is Rick." He took his hat off, allowing a braided, gray ponytail to fall down onto his back. "I've called you three or four times at your office, but you never call me back."

"Nothing for us to talk about."

"Son, I know we got off to a bad start way back when." He scratched a permanent two week-old gray beard and squinted watery eyes at me. "But you're 'bout as ornery as a polecat with his tail up."

"Then why the phone calls?"

"Sometimes a skunk spreading stink around is the only way to flush out the truth."

"You seem to have gone a little more country since I last saw you, Buckley. Is that for my benefit?"

"I'm afraid it's out of habit. My upper crust clientele expect an attorney from Texas to be folksy. I aim to please." He threaded the brim of his cowboy hat through his fingers. "Mind if I sit down, Rick?"

I weighed hearing Buckley out against the possibility of seeing Turk hobble in on his cane. I gambled and nodded to the right side of the booth. Buckley slid in, set his hat on the table, and steepled his fingers.

The waiter came by and asked if he could get me anything else. By the way Buckley wetted his lips, it looked like he had his mind set on the first nip of the day.

"Just the check. Thanks." I looked at Buckley. "Despite the fact that I ignore your phone calls, you keep making them, and you somehow track me to a restaurant I only decided to eat at an hour ago. What the hell do you want?"

"I'm not trying to pester you, son." He spread his hands open over his hat. "I heard you eat back at your old haunts every now and again. It's that important that we talk."

"It's important to you."

"I know I put a burr under your saddle during that Windsor mess, but I was just protecting my client. And everything turned out okay come closin' time."

The "Windsor mess" had ended two years ago, but it still haunted my dreams.

"It turned out okay for you. A change in clientele and zip codes." I slowly nodded my head. "But, come closin' time, three people were dead." And one left walking with a cane.

"Actually four people died." He avoided my eyes. "If you include the one you killed."

"Why are you here?"

"Fine. We'll put the brass tacks on the table." He leaned forward. "You remember the Eddington boy?"

"Randall Eddington?"

"Yes."

"The murderer?"

Randall Eddington had been eighteen when he killed his parents and younger sister. The murders went national as the networks' tragedy of the month. Every three letter combination of the alphabet had news vans in La Jolla for the trial later that year, even though the judge wouldn't allow cameras in the courtroom. It had been good for Muldoon's business for a month or so. Even breathless reporters with nothing new to report had to eat after the red light went dark.

"Well, the jury found him guilty. That's true." Buckley's eyes had a little hang dog in them. "In the first trial, anyway."

"First trial? I only remember one."

"One so far." Buckley wiped his lips like that phantom drink couldn't come soon enough. "So, what does getting a psychopath a new trial have to do with me?"

"I don't believe he is a psychopath."

"Okay. Let's just call him a kid with anger management issues." I leaned forward and crossed my forearms on the table. "But why me? There are plenty of private dicks in San Diego with more experience who can fudge up some evidence for you."

"I'm not looking for a prop job, Rick." He put a leathery hand on my arm. "I'm looking for the truth. And if the Windsor case proved anything to me, it's that you're a truth seeker."

"I'm a guy who peeks through windows and snaps photos of married men locked onto unmarried women."

I slid down the leather bench opposite Buckley and stood up outside the booth.

"You gonna' do that for the rest of your life, son?" Buckley grabbed his hat and stood up next to me. "Or, do you want to work a case that matters. Something that won't make you want to scrub yourself with a wire brush in the shower at the end of the day."

"I use Comet and sandpaper." I strode around him down into the main dining room. "See you around, Buckley."

The moon still hid behind the clouds and the ocean down below Prospect Street pushed up a heavy breeze that poked cold fingers in my face. I'd almost made it to my car when I heard boots clomping behind me. Cowboy boots.

"Rick!" Buckley was out of breath, his cowboy hat clenched in his hand when he caught up to me. His face was red, either from wind or exertion. "Just hold on one dang minute and hear me out."

"I've heard enough, Buckley." I opened the door to my car. "I'm not interested. The kid got what he deserved."

"Cops make mistakes, Rick. You and your ex-girlfriend are proof of that."

"Sometimes they get it right." I slid into the car.

"Tony Moretti was lead detective on the case." Buckley let his bloodhound eyes droop a little lower. "You still convinced the boy got what he deserved?"

Moretti was now Police Chief of the La Jolla Police Department. He'd only been a detective when he tried to pin a murder on me a couple of years back. But just because Moretti had been wrong about me didn't make the kid innocent.

"Look, Buckley. I couldn't help you even if I wanted to." I closed the car door and rolled down the window. "I work exclusively for La Jolla Investigations. I can't freelance. You want our firm on it, talk to Bob Reitzmeyer."

"He's not the right fit. We want you."

"Sorry. Can't help you." I turned the ignition key. "Good luck, Buckley."

I started to roll up the window, but Buckley's hand on it stopped me.

"Randall's grandparents remember you from that article in The Reader about the Windsor murder. The one about you being the fella who really caught the killer. The rest of the media got it wrong and made Moretti out to be a hero. The Reader got it right."

"I'm sorry for the grandparents, but there's nothing I can do." He was wrong about The Reader. It didn't get it right, either.

"They've got their life's savings liquid and ready to pour out to the man who'll find the truth about what happened to their family. They just want to make sure their grandson gets a fair shake."

"Are you more interested in the fair shake or the liquid assets?"

"You don't know me very well, Rick." His watery eyes went dry and all the Texas hospitality left them.

"I know you well enough, Buckley." I pulled out of the parking spot and gunned it down Prospect Street as the cool, moonless night drew down around La Jolla.

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