

Yesterday's Echo

Chapter One

The first time I saw her, she made me remember and she made me forget.

She sat at the bar in my restaurant sipping wine and turning heads. Her roots stretched back to somewhere in the Pacific Islands. Along the way, a dash of Anglo joined the lineage. Her skin had taken the sun and turned it into dark caramel. Black hair flowed down over toned shoulders, matched by a cocktail dress worn the way many women tried, but few could. Black slingback heels showed off her legs.

I watched her from the entrance to the bar. She caught me looking and I held her eyes, dark slices of Asian mystery that dared me to turn away. I'd turned away from a lot of stares over the last eight years. Some had accusations in them, others just questions coupled with faint recognition. All haunted me like echoes from my past. Her eyes were harder to read. There seemed to be hunger hiding underneath cool detachment. Or maybe it was just bored certainty. A veil she pulled down to separate herself from men's leering eyes.

Before I could decide if I wanted to risk getting behind that veil, a flash of blonde caught my eye. Angela Albright, wife to the mayor of San Diego, steadied herself with a hand against the wall adjacent to the bar's entrance.

"He's late." Her words were slushy with alcohol and she seemed to be talking to herself, no one in particular, and everyone all at once. Her attire matched her condition: distressed blue jeans, baggy coat, and a homeless woman-sized shoulder bag.

"The mayor?" I took her arm and guided her to a table and barstool against the wall. She smelled like a margarita left out all day in the sun. I'd seen her cheerfully tilted before, but never stumbling drunk.

"No. Not him, Rick." She pinched her eyes closed and waved a hand in front of her face. "He's up in L.A., begging fat cats for money and votes."

Her husband was running for governor of California. His wife seen frat-boy drunk out in public wasn't the kind of publicity his campaign needed a month before the election. I liked the mayor okay, but I didn't care whether or not he won. Politics was best viewed from a distance. But the mayor and his wife were loyal customers and good for business.

"Let me get you some coffee and you can tell me who you're looking for." I caught Pat the bartender's eye, held out my hand like I was holding a mug, and mouthed, "Coffee."

Angela shook her head like a little girl told to eat her vegetables. In her early thirties, she still carried the youthful looks of a slightly sophisticated surfer girl. But the life of a politician's wife had started to pull at the corners of her blue eyes.

Pat arrived with the coffee, glanced at Angela, and raised an eyebrow at me as he left.

"I don't want coffee!" Angela pushed the cup away and some liquid sloshed onto the table.
"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The devil."

We got all types at the restaurant, but I'd yet to see Satan. Maybe Angela was even drunker than she looked. She was usually the pretty wallflower who faded into the background. Tonight I smelled a scene about to explode. I owed it to my customers to keep things Southern California laid-back. I owed it to my regulars to keep them from making asses of themselves in my restaurant.

"I don't think he's coming in tonight."

"No." Her eyes went wide. "He'll be here."

I stole a glance at the woman in the black dress with the mysterious eyes at the far end of the bar. Apparently, she'd been stealing one of me. She looked down at her wine glass when my eyes met hers.

"Angela, if the devil comes in, I'll tell him you were looking for him. In the meantime, I'm calling you a cab."

"No!" She sprang off the barstool and bumped into the next table, knocking over a half-full Corona. I grabbed the bottle before it toppled all the way over, but a stream of beer splashed across the table and cascaded onto the board shorts of a sun-aged surfer.

"Dude!" He shot up and looked down at his damp crotch.

I felt heads swivel and eyes lock onto me. Angela swerved around the surfer and out of the bar.

"Next two are on the house." I said and followed Angela down the hall toward the dining room. She bumped into the hostess, managed to stay upright long enough to make the turn toward the front door, then crashed onto one of the leather sofas in the entranceway, her purse spilling its contents.

Makeup, lipstick, keys, tampons, a wallet, a cell phone, and an overstuffed manila envelope lay strewn across the floor. Kris, my ace hostess, bent down and started shoveling the items back into the purse. Angela bounded off the sofa and grabbed the envelope before Kris could get to it.

"Thanks." She took the purse from Kris and shoved the envelope inside.

I nodded Kris back to the hostess stand and knelt down next to Angela. Tears slid down her cheeks and her watery eyes were the color of a shallow bay.

"I can't go back there." Her voice, a wet whisper. She fell back onto the sofa, mashing the purse to her belly like a fullback protecting a football.

"We'll just stay out here." I sat down and gently laid an arm around her shoulder. "I'm buying the guy a couple rounds. He'll be fine."

"No. You don't—" She jerked out a breath and tucked her head into her shoulder. The tears became a steady flow.

I slipped my cell phone out of my pocket and called a cab. After a couple minutes, Angela finally let me lead her out of the restaurant, through the terra-cotta courtyard, and up the stairs to Prospect Street. The October night had a hint of winter in it and the stars hung low in the sky. A taxi waited at the curb.

"Time to go home, Angela." I opened the cab's door.

"He doesn't know who I am." Angela looked at me through tear drained eyes.

"He'll get you home." I steered her into the cab, gave the driver two twenties, told him her address, and then shut the door. I watched Angela lean over the front seat and say something to the driver as he drove away. Maybe she redirected him. Maybe she asked for a barf bag. It didn't matter.

I liked Angela, but she was someone else's problem now. People were free to screw up their lives as they pleased. Just not in my restaurant.

I surveyed Prospect Street, La Jolla's restaurant row. The sidewalks were almost empty.

Most of the tourists had gone home and paradise was again left to the locals. Old-money natives felt safe enough to venture down from fortresses high on hillsides above the ocean. Type As were back from their Hawaiian vacations, packing in overtime until they could jet off to Aspen in the winter. And pub crawlers could again publicly slip into private stupors in peace.

Kris waited for me back at the hostess stand. "The women's bathroom is backed up again and a lady needs to use it."

One crisis averted, another one to solve.

Muldoon's Steak House was an old-school restaurant with a casual atmosphere. Redwood slats and polished copper on the walls, big gas grill out in the open flanked by a salad bar, hardwood tables, captain's chairs, waitstaff in Dockers and golf shirts. We kept our prices reasonable and our labor costs down. Sometimes that meant me waiting tables or helping out behind the bar or the grill. Whatever it took to keep the doors open and the creditors from walking through them.

Tonight it meant playing plumber.

The ladies' john was just outside the kitchen door, opposite the grill. A woman in a green baby doll dress stood outside it. Blonde, but not by birth. The gold around her neck and the diamond on her finger glowed like hard-won trophies. She looked to be holding off middle age with the help of a personal trainer and a plastic surgeon.

"Sorry about the inconvenience, ma'am." I pointed to the busboy station ten feet away. "You can use the men's restroom around that corner. I'll have someone watch the door for you."

"Thank you for coming to my rescue." She gave me a perfect smile.

The busboy stood loading place settings into water glasses at the bus station.

"Justin, make sure the men's restroom is empty and then guard the door while our guest uses the facilities."

Justin, a gangly high school kid, looked at the woman, blushed, and went around the abutment that separated the bus station from the men's room.

The woman didn't move. "You look familiar to me."

It could have been a line. It could have been a ghost from my past. Either one led me down a path I didn't want to go. "I'm here almost every night."

"I've never been here before." She peered up at me. It felt like she was staring into my past. "I think it was on TV. Have you ever been on TV?"

A familiar knot tightened my stomach.

"It must have been someone who looked like me." I pointed toward the bathroom. "The restroom is right around that wall."

The woman kept staring and smiling. Then the smile fell and her hand went to her throat.

She recognized me now.

The knot in my stomach grew tighter.

She took a step backward, then spun and hurried to the men's bathroom.

I slipped into the kitchen and pushed aside memories of Santa Barbara.

And Colleen.

They were always there, just out of reach, waiting for a trigger to shoot back across my consciousness. But, after eight years, I learned how to lock them back up in the box of my old life. Work helped. Duties, responsibilities, tasks that required a narrowed focus. Tonight it was a clogged drain.

I wheeled the plumber's snake out to the drain cleanout just outside the ladies restroom. The snake was electric and as temperamental as a North Korean dictator. I got it running, bent down and fed the metal auger into the cleanout pipe. Fifteen feet in, the snake hit resistance then gave way. I reversed the drive and the device pulled out the obstruction. A bloated, used tampon flopped out of the pipe and splatted on the floor like a dead mackerel.

I looked up from the engorged cotton blob and saw tanned, athletic legs. They belonged to the woman in the black cocktail dress from the bar.

"There's always a woman somewhere clogging up the works, isn't there?" Her voice buzzed my spine like a wet finger in a light socket. It was gravelly and deep. Just like Colleen's had been. Long ago. It lingered in my ears, warm and rumbly.

The shock subsided and I straightened up.

"And usually a man left bent over, cleaning up the mess," I said.

She gave me a polite laugh.

The busboy was out on the floor, so it was up to me to play bathroom sentinel. I asked the woman to wait, then rolled the snake back into the kitchen, washed my hands, and delegated mop and tampon duty to the dishwasher.

I reemerged and led the woman to the men's bathroom. In heels, she was almost as tall as me. Maybe five eleven. She moved with an easy, unpracticed sensuality. A whiff of cinnamon rode off her bare shoulders.

After I'd made sure the men's room was empty, I held the door open.

"I'm Rick." I put out my right hand. "I'll be your doorman tonight."

"I'm Melody." She gave my hand a gentle squeeze. Her skin was warm. "This is exciting. The men's bathroom!"

"Try not to clog up the works."

"Don't worry." She stopped in the doorway and flashed me a near perfect smile, flawed by one crooked incisor. "I clean up my own messes."

She didn't take long.

"It wasn't as exciting as I hoped, but thanks for guarding the door."

"This is La Jolla. Excitement here is a rainy day." I turned to lead Melody away from the bathroom, but she stood still.

"Then shuffling a very drunk next First Lady of California out of the restaurant must rate high on the excitement meter." She smiled and her mahogany eyes brightened, almost as if the veil had been lifted.

I didn't say anything.

"Why was she so upset?" Her voice was low. Conspiratorial. She moved in close and rested warm fingers on my forearm.

Melody was good. She had me going, but I knew I was being played. The smile, the touch, the whisper. She had an agenda that had more to do with Angela Albright than my magnetism. Maybe she was a reporter looking for a headline or from the rival campaign looking for dirt. It didn't matter.

"I'd better get back to work." I extended my hand. "Nice meeting you, Melody."

Her eyes tried to dig beneath mine for an instant. Then she took my hand in a slow shake and gave me another perfect, imperfect smile.

"You're an old-fashioned gentleman." Melody let go of my hand. "It's been a pleasure, Rick."

She walked through the dining room toward the bar. I watched the smooth swirl of her hips. She shot a glance over her shoulder and caught me looking. Again.

The next half hour I made a few rounds of the kitchen and the dining room. The night inched along. It was a little before nine and not busy enough to keep the hostess on beyond the top of the hour. I checked the bar before I sent Kris home.

We had live jazz Wednesday through Sunday starting at nine, and the band had yet to take the small stage to the left of the bar. They were chatting up customers, probably in hopes of scoring a round of free drinks. Leron, the front man, held court before two women half his age. I caught his eye and tapped my watch. He nodded, bowed to the ladies, and started rounding up his mates.

I glanced toward the corner where I'd first seen Melody. She was still there, but no longer alone. A man with slicked-back red hair and a soul patch under his lower lip hovered over her. A dark blue neck tattoo peeked above his collar. He seemed miscast in a gray sport coat and black slacks. Prison orange was more his color. His lips were moving near Melody's ear. She didn't look happy. He looked like he made a lot of people feel that way. And enjoyed it. Why was a scumbag like that talking to Melody? Maybe she needed an out.

I fought the pull to intervene. It was none of my business. If it didn't affect the restaurant, it didn't affect me. I didn't know Melody. She was a look, a cinnamon scent, a tug at my gut. My days of interceding in strangers' affairs were long past. You needed a badge for that. Or empathy. I didn't have either.

Not anymore.

© Matt Coyle