

YESTERDAY'S ECHO

A Novel

Matt Coyle

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FIRST EDITION

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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 of 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 steal-

ing 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 them 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.

Du'doon's

CHAPTER TWO

I let the waitstaff go home at nine thirty. We stopped serving food at eleven, but the dining room was empty and the bar half full. I'd handle any late diners myself. Anything to keep the labor costs down during slow months.

At nine forty-five, a man in a navy pinstripe suit entered the restaurant. The suit had to be Italian and fit him like a two-thousand-dollar suit should. He had a couple inches on six feet and was lean. His gray widow's peak knifed back from an angular face that dead-ended in a square chin. He peered down at me through gray eyes that took in light and reflected none back.

I said hello. He didn't say anything. He looked past me like I wasn't there and sauntered toward the bar. I didn't mind being ignored. Especially by the wealthy elite. If they'd ignored me back in Santa Barbara, things would've been different. Well, most things.

After The Suit passed by, I noticed Red Soul Patch returning from the bathroom. His eyes locked onto the back of the man and he stopped. He waited until The Suit disappeared into the bar, then buzzed by me out the front door. A shade paler than when I'd seen him earlier.

You see all kinds of wealth in La Jolla. Old money, nouveau riche, oil sheiks, professional athletes, trust fund slackers. But none who could send a scumbag with prison tats running in the opposite direction just by being seen.

I trailed The Suit into the bar.

The band had just come off a break and opened with a cover of "Eleanor Rigby."

Leron's tenor sax took the place of the lyrics. He was on tonight and he made that sax sing.

I scanned the bar and found The Suit. With Melody. He had his hand on her shoulder, leading her toward the exit. She looked as happy as she'd been when Red Soul Patch whispered in her ear.

None of my business. Except that they stopped right in front of me.

"Is it too late for dinner?" Melody asked. Her voice was higher than before. Slightly brittle. The man loomed over her, his dead eyes held me at a distance, an imitation smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

I grabbed a couple menus and a wine list from the hostess stand and led them to a candlelit booth. I ran the night's specials and asked if they wanted drinks. Melody ordered a glass of Mer Soleil chardonnay and then Italian Suit finally spoke.

"I'll have Macallan, single malt. That is, if your bartender can find it behind the flavored vodkas." His voice was a deep ooze. A note of superiority rode underneath a baritone that filled the booth like hot tar spilled over cement.

"Twelve- or eighteen-year-old?" The GenY'ers covered the bar costs, but you didn't stay open in La Jolla as a restaurant without catering to old money.

"Well then, you didn't really have to ask. Did you?" He showed me teeth. It was either a smile or a show of dominance. "Neat, of course."

"Of course."

I liked him better when he ignored me.

When I returned to the dining room with the drinks, the man's voice spilled out of the booth, "—a dangerous game." An edge broke through his syrupy cadence.

He held Melody's right hand across the table. The muscles in her arm at full cord. Her left hand hidden in her lap. A flame from the candle danced in a mild draft. Anger flickered in her eyes and the candlelight disappeared into his.

Whatever was going on was none of my business. Domestic

dispute, argument among friends, or enemies. It didn't matter. I had a restaurant to run and, at the end of the night, a quiet life to retreat back into.

I set the drinks down and looked at Melody. The anger in her eyes melted down into a plea. I hesitated. I lived by a code that kept me out of the spotlight and out of trouble. It had worked for eight years. Before I could decide whether to break it for a woman I didn't know, The Suit interrupted.

"That will be all for now, waiter." The certainty of his command of the situation hung off each word.

I checked the table. His hand still clutched Melody's.

"Everything all right?" I looked at her.

She stayed silent, but the plea remained in her eyes. The man grinned up at me. This wasn't his boardroom, it was my restaurant. I glanced back down at his hand then into his eyes. It was like staring down a well.

"Everything all right." I left the question mark off the end.

He looked at Melody and then back at me. He kept showing me teeth, then finally let go of Melody's hand. She pulled it back and dropped it into her lap. I noticed her table setting was short a steak knife.

I turned to leave when the molasses baritone stopped me. "Is the proprietor in tonight?"

"If you need to talk to an owner, I'll do." If he wanted to complain about my service, he'd have to do it to me. This was my boardroom.

"You mean we've had the pleasure of Mr. Muldoon's company and weren't aware of it?" He smiled at Melody. She didn't smile back.

"I'm his partner," I said.

"Why, that's odd." With the dead eyes and the white teeth, he looked like a Great White zeroing in on a sea lion. "My realtor saw this property on the market a month ago and the only owner listed was Thomas Muldoon."

His statement landed in my gut like a sucker punch. I had to

fight just to breathe and stay upright. My partner and best friend trying to sell the restaurant out from under me? Couldn't be. This guy was just flexing his muscles to remind me he was still in charge.

"We have a private arrangement." Like any good fighter, I tried to convince my opponent that his punch hadn't hurt me.

"Business seems to be a bit down." He surveyed the empty dining room. "Now might be a good time to explore new career opportunities."

He was right. We'd lost money in September and were running darker red in October. All of which was none of his damn business.

"I'm happy here." I matched his lifeless look with one of my own. "Thanks."

"Well, apparently your partner isn't." He pulled a business card from a silver case and lifted it toward me. "Have him call me."

The name "Peter Stone" was embossed on the card with a phone number. Nothing else. I snatched it and retreated to the kitchen.

I delegated all further interaction with booth one to Justin and went back into the tiny office at the end of the storage hallway behind the kitchen. I sat in the captain's chair in front of the chipped oak desk. Corkboards tacked with pictures chronicling the life of Muldoon's hung on the walls.

I zeroed in on my favorite picture. In it, Thomas "Turk" Muldoon and I were going nose to nose over some long-forgotten dispute in a pickup softball game. We were always opposing captains and played every game like it was the World Series. After a few beers and a rehashing of the highs and lows of the game, we'd get back to being best friends.

If the restaurant really was for sale, there wasn't enough beer in the world for Turk and me to be best friends again. I looked at the black rotary phone below the picture and remembered Turk couldn't be reached. Tough to get cell service while hanging off the face of Half Dome in Yosemite. After he mounted that summit, we'd have to convene one of our own.

Justin popped his head through the doorway. "Booth one decided not to eat. They just want the check."

I left Justin in the kitchen with the dishwasher to get a head start on the nightly floor scrub and went into the dining room. I'd just printed out Peter Stone's check at the wait station when a crash of broken glass snapped my head up. Melody stumbled out of booth one onto the floor. She sprang up, feral eyes wide. Stone lunged at her and grabbed her wrist as she started to run for the exit.

I was on Stone in three strides. I grabbed his wrist and twisted. Melody broke free and ran toward the front door. I let go, but my force had already sent Stone backward and his leg caught a chair and he hit the floor hard on his back. I glanced over my shoulder at Melody and she did the same. Our eyes locked for an instant. I saw primal fear in them. Nothing else. She spun her head back around and sprinted down the hall and out the front door.

I turned back to Stone. He was already to his feet and moving forward. I stepped in front of him. He tried to move around me, but I shadowed him like an offensive lineman fending off a pass rusher.

"Are you adding holding me against my will to assault?" A smile cracked his face.

What was I doing? Playing hero to a woman I'd never see again? Getting back at my past through an asshole in my present? The right thing? None of the motivations justified my getting involved. Not even the last. I'd moved on instinct and adrenaline. Reason hadn't entered into it.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't running out on the bill."

Stone pulled out his wallet and I noticed that his left hand was bleeding. Melody must have put that missing steak knife to good use. He handed me a one hundred dollar bill and stepped around me. I let him go. Melody'd had enough time to get lost and I had a quiet life to try and find again.

The deep-water voice turned me around.

"Good luck on the job hunt, Rick." He gave me the dead eyes. He knew my name without me giving it to him. What else did he

know? “If you need a character reference, feel free to have your next potential employer give me a call.”

Stone flowed out of the dining room like a lazy stream. No hurry, now back in command of his world. He pulled a cell phone from his breast pocket as he turned down the entry and out of the restaurant.

When I locked up the restaurant at twelve thirty a.m., a shadow moved across the etched glass window as I double-checked the front door. I spun around and found Melody. A dark leather coat now covered the upper half of the killer dress and her hair was pulled up under a black San Francisco Giants ball cap. Black tennis shoes had replaced her heels.

“Melody.” In the light of a patio lamp I noticed that her left eye was swollen and bloodshot. Stone must have found her in spite of my schoolboy heroics. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes I’m fine.” The words came out fast and ran together. Her good eye, a black drop in a white circle of fear, scanned the night. “But I need your help. I think someone’s following me.”

“Stone? Did he hit you?”

“No. I don’t know.”

I’d already broken my rule of not getting involved once tonight and now that had mutated into a black eye and a midnight cry for help. What would my next involvement lead to?

I offered my cell phone to Melody. “Call nine-one-one. I’ll wait with you until the police arrive.”

“I don’t want the police. I just need to go someplace safe.” Her eyes tugged at me like a scared child. “Just for a little while.”

Even rookie beat cops know the danger of getting involved in a domestic dispute. But that’s why they were cops, and I wasn’t anymore. They got paid to run into danger; I got paid to lock and unlock a restaurant.

“There’s nothing I can do that the police can’t do better.” I slid my hands around her leather-clad biceps. There were taut, ready for fight or flight. “The safest place for you is the police station.

It's only a couple blocks away. I can walk or drive you over there."

"I'll be fine on my own." Her eyes shimmered as they filled with liquid. She backed away from me into the night. "Goodbye, Rick."

The husky gravel in her voice cracked into raspy sand. The way Colleen's used to when our fights ended in tears. Just like the last night I'd ever see her.

"Come on." I extended my hand.

"Where are we going?" She stayed in the darkness.

"Someplace safe."

She took my hand and we climbed the steps that lead up from the courtyard to Prospect Street. When we hit the top step, I saw headlights creeping down the street toward us. I spun and hugged Melody.

"Play along while this car passes," I said.

She tightened, but hid her face between my neck and shoulder and wrapped her arms around my waist. I caught the scent of cinnamon and a trace of lavender as I pressed my cheek against her head. Her breath was warm on my neck.

I gently turned us so I could spy the street. The headlights belonged to an SUV. Big, black, tinted windows. A Ford Expedition. It passed in a steady crawl. No front plate. Parked cars blocked the view of the back. I watched it until it disappeared around a bend.

"Okay." I loosened my grip around her waist, but didn't let go.

Melody stayed still for a second, then slowly turned her head, sliding her cheek along mine until she was facing me. The only thing between us was the bill of her Giants cap pressed against my brow. Her lips, full, cushiony, inviting. Her eyes, obsidian ciphers. We hung there, suspended, our breath comingling.

Melody moved first. A half step backward. "I guess we'd better go."

I grabbed her hand like it'd been my idea to break the trance and led her onto the street.

We hustled down Prospect toward Cave Street and the bank

parking lot that held my car. A thick breeze off the ocean chilled the night. I scanned both sides of the street as we passed palm trees, restaurants, jewelers, and art galleries, but didn't see anyone who wanted to steal my restaurant or punch Melody. Just another autumn night in the Jewel by the Sea.

When we hit the parking lot, a rat the size of an heiress's purse dog shot out from a hedge and scampered up a palm tree. Melody whiplashed but didn't scream.

Safely nestled in the palm fronds on top of the tree, the rat could look out over paradise and plan its next intrusion into it.