

DARK FISSURES

Also by Matt Coyle

Yesterday's Echo

Night Tremors

For Review Purposes Only
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DARK FISSURES

A RICK CAHILL NOVEL

MATT COYLE

 **Oceanview Publishing**
Longboat Key, Florida

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*For Charles Henry Coyle, Jr.
Father, Veteran, Self-Made Man
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Any errors on the law, car sales, life insurance, real estate, medical issues, coroners, the FBI, police procedures, or SEAL conduct are solely the author's.

CHAPTER ONE

A RAINBOW LIGHT bar went off in my rearview mirror. Then the quick whir of a siren. I pulled over onto the side of the road.

Again.

Pre-rush-hour traffic sped by on Torrey Pines Road, the main artery in and out of La Jolla's northern end. I checked the side mirror. The cop exited his cruiser. Tall. Lean. Aviator sunglasses above sea-cliff cheekbones. I'd seen him once or twice, but he'd never stopped me before.

Others had.

The cop put his hand on the handle of the Sig Sauer P229 pistol in his holster as he approached my car. I put both hands on the steering wheel. In plain sight. Nothing in the car could get me arrested. Or shot.

Except me.

I scanned the outline of the cop's uniform. Pressed and too form-fitted against his body to hide a throw-down gun. Unless he had it tucked between his Sam Browne duty belt and his back. He stopped behind my left ear.

"License and registration." Military cadence with a dollop of contempt hanging off the end. The cop's brass nameplate read Sgt. Buchholz.

"I have to reach into the glove compartment for the registration," I said before I slowly reached across and retrieved the document,

keeping my left hand on the steering wheel. I repeated the exercise while taking my license from my wallet.

“Been drinking today, Mr. Cahill?” He called me by my name before he even looked at my driver’s license.

“No.” The truth. Luckily. I put my hands back on the wheel and stared straight ahead.

“Smoke some marijuana?”

“No.” I waited for him to run down a list of drugs legal and illegal, but he stopped at weed.

“What’s your business in La Jolla today?”

“Just picked up my mail.” I bit down the urge to say none of his damn business and nodded at a stack of letters in a rubber band on the passenger seat. I kept a La Jolla mailing address at a Postal Annex to keep erect the façade that my investigative agency operated out of that town. La Jollans had nice houses and liquid assets, but they had problems just like everybody else. Maybe more. Money caused as many problems as it solved.

“Do you know why I stopped you, Mr. Cahill?”

“No.” Because the chief of police put a target on my back.

“You were swerving in and out of traffic and doing forty in a thirty-five-mile-per-hour zone.”

“How fast was the guy going who sped past me right before you pulled me over?” I could only take so much.

“Step out of the car, please.” He stepped back and kept his right hand on the handle of his gun.

As usual, I had to pay the debt that my lip had borrowed. I slowly got out of the car. Traffic whizzed by, swirling a wind that pulled at me.

The cop ran me through the drunk-driving exercises. He made me walk the inner line of a bike path three feet from whizzing traffic. Cars honked, teenagers hooted. I walked the line. When I’d run through his tricks, the cop had me sit down on the curb

while he went back to his car so people could eyeball me as they sped by.

The November sun sliced down between fluffy clouds and bounced off my sunglasses. Not the way I'd planned to spend my afternoon. The Postal Annex that held my mailbox was on La Jolla Boulevard. If I'd just taken the Boulevard out of town going south, I might have avoided Sergeant Buchholz or any of his friends. The cops had a heavier presence in the northern section of La Jolla. The drive home would have been longer, but I probably wouldn't have been sitting on a curb waiting on a warrant check.

But that would be giving in.

Sergeant Buchholz talked into the car radio and checked his computer for warrants, but he already knew me front to back. Everybody did down at the La Jolla Police Department. What they may not have known was why Police Chief Tony Moretti had circled a bull's-eye around me. I did.

And I knew the bull's-eye would grow tighter and tighter.

Sergeant Buchholz finished up in the car and sauntered over to me like he had all the time in the world and like my time was irrelevant. He stood over me and pushed down a pen and a traffic ticket book with a citation flipped to the front.

"Sign at the bottom and appear at the courthouse on the back before the date listed." He curled the right corner of his lips into a smirk. "Of course, your signature is not an admission of guilt. You'll receive a letter in the mail giving you the option of paying the fine ahead of time, in case you don't want to argue your case against me in court."

I stood up and faced Sergeant Buchholz before I took the book and pen from his hand.

I could feel his eyes boring into me behind the sunglasses, daring me to challenge his authority. His power. The power to disrupt a

citizen's life just because he could. Or in my case because he, like all the cops at LJPD, had a wink and a nod from their chief to harass me whenever possible. But Buchholz came to it naturally, like a cat toying with a mouse.

I knew the weight of the badge. How it could find a crack in your character and chip away at it until a dark fissure ran through your soul. I'd been stripped of my badge long ago, before the crevasse within could swallow me up. The crack inside Buchholz seemed to be deep and wide.

"You did some good police work here today, Sergeant." I signed the citation and handed the ticket book and pen back to him. "I'm sure this is what you envisioned when you signed up twenty years ago. Harassing citizens on dubious traffic stops. Your chief will be proud. Tell Moretti I said hello."

"Drive home safely, Mr. Cahill. The streets can be a dangerous place." Buchholz pulled my copy of the ticket from the book and handed it to me. "Even in La Jolla."

CHAPTER TWO

I LET THE call go to the answering machine. Again. I looked over at the phone on the kitchen wall from my spot on the couch in the living room. I wondered if I'd miss it. Probably not. Nothing good ever came from answering that phone. I'd miss the wall the phone hung from, along with all the other walls that held up the roof of my house. Well, my house and the bank's. Soon to just be the bank's.

Midnight stared at me from the backyard through the sliding glass door. He didn't paw the glass like he wanted to come inside. Just stared. He'd spent more and more time outside lately. Almost like he knew his days in a spacious backyard were numbered. He was a black Lab, after all, and clairvoyant. Those big brown eyes stared right into your soul.

My cell phone rang in my jeans pocket. I pulled it out and looked at the screen, hoping the bank hadn't cracked the code and found my work number. I'd worked for a big bucks investigative agency in La Jolla when I signed the mortgage papers a couple years ago. Now I worked for my own agency. My phone number had changed.

So had my income.

I didn't recognize the number on the phone's screen. It wasn't the bank's. I'd memorized that one. It wasn't the La Jolla Police Department Chief of Police's, either. I knew that number, too. The chief hadn't called me in a while, but I knew he'd contact me again.

Maybe soon, maybe not. But eventually there'd be a knock on the door and a cop holding a warrant for my arrest.

For murder.

In the meantime, I'd fight the battles right in front of me. Maybe the call on my cell was from a paying client, and I'd get to stave off the foreclosure for another month. I answered the phone.

"Mr. Cahill?" The voice flowed like a mountain stream, holding the Ls for an extra beat. A hint of the South. Musical. Sensual, without effort.

"We can start with Rick."

"I think my husband was murdered." Nothing sensual about that.

"Then you should call the police." I needed the fee, but I knew my limitations. And the law.

"I already did. They ruled Jim's death a suicide." Calm.

"Then I'm not sure what you think I can do for you."

"You can find the truth."

A year ago, somebody else hired me to find the truth. Back when I worked for a man I respected and could pay my mortgage. I found the truth and people lost their lives. I only lost my job. And a couple friends.

"Sometimes the truth is what everyone else thinks it is." I thought about the people who'd died during my quest last year. "And sometimes it's better to let the truth lie."

"That's not good enough for me, Mr. Cahill." A slight scold in the alpine stream's current. "I need to know what happened to my husband. And I thought you would be the man to help me find out. I thought you cared about the truth."

The house phone rang. I walked into the kitchen and looked at the screen. The bank.

Again. I owed it three months' mortgage payments. That was the bank's truth. And mine.

“Meet me at Muldoon’s Steakhouse in La Jolla at five. I’ll be in the bar.”

“I’d rather meet at your office.”

“That is my office.”

* * *

La Jolla sits on the coast just north of San Diego and is known for its beautiful beaches, stratospheric wealth, and Dr. Seuss. Muldoon’s Steak House had been a fixture on Prospect Street, La Jolla’s restaurant row, for over forty years. I’d spent seven of those years as its manager with a sliver of ownership that had never amounted to anything but a fractured friendship. Now it got me a table in the bar or dining room whenever I had to meet with a client.

The hostess greeted me by name when I entered the restaurant. I couldn’t remember hers, so I just nodded on my way to the bar. Pat, a bartender I’d hired ten years ago, held up a Ballast Point IPA. I shook my head.

“Client?” Pat’s eyebrows rose on his moon face.

“Yep.”

“Haven’t seen you in a while.”

Pat was on the Post-it note list of people I considered friends. I could have told him I hadn’t been to Muldoon’s lately because I hadn’t had a client in a while, but kept it to myself. He had his own problems, I guess. Our conversations rarely ventured past the Chargers’ or Padres’ problems.

I sat at a table in the far corner with my back to the wall. I hadn’t bothered to tell the woman on the phone what I looked like. She’d done her research on me, so I figured she’d seen a picture. My face had turned up in a few newspapers and online a couple times over

the years. Some for fame, some for blame. Most of which I didn't deserve.

The bar sat empty save for Pat and me. Muldoon's didn't officially open until 5:00 p.m., another five minutes. At 4:58 p.m. a woman walked in. Tall, long red hair, fair-skinned. Levi's hugged her legs and a sky-blue sweater couldn't hide her lean curves. She looked around and spotted me. Recognition in big round eyes colored a shade darker than her sweater, but no smile.

She walked over to me. Long confident strides of an athlete. A sexy athlete. She looked to be around my age, thirty-six. When she pulled up at my table, something about her eyes told me she was slightly older. Not wrinkles or crow's feet. Confidence. Pain. Life.

"Mr. Cahill?" A question that didn't need answering.

I stood up and offered a hand. "Rick."

She shook my hand. "Brienne Colton."

The mellifluous voice from the phone. Light, but resonant. Musical. Her last name rang a dull bell in the back of my mind, but I couldn't place the connection.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Are you having anything?"

"Not on the job."

She peered at me, her left eyelid dropping to half-mast. "I'll have a beer. You choose."

When a woman tells me to choose a beer, I usually go for something light and delicate. Light and delicate didn't match my first impression of Brienne Colton.

I looked at Pat. "You can pull that Ballast Point IPA back out of the fridge."

The IPA was bitter and whacked you hard with hops.

"Just one?"

"Yep." Too early to get hit hard with anything.

Pat put the beer on the bar with a glass next to it. “No charge.”

I went to the bar, laid down a five-dollar bill, grabbed the beer, and left the glass.

“Thanks.”

“Mrs. Colton, let’s get a table inside.” I arced my arm toward the hallway that led past the hostess station into the dining room.

Brianne Colton walked over and I ushered her down the hallway. The petite hostess whose name I couldn’t remember smiled as we neared her.

“Can I get you a table, Mr. Cahill?”

“We’re going up to booth four. Thanks. I know the way. You can tell the staff to ignore us.”

The arrangement I had with the owner, Turk Muldoon, allowed me to grab a table or booth when the restaurant wasn’t busy. I scheduled most of my client meets when the restaurant just opened to avoid a crowd.

And Turk. We’d been best friends once. Now we had a business arrangement.

Muldoon’s Steak House was stuck in the 1970s: salad bar, bronze and redwood paneling, dim lighting. Stale atmosphere, but good food. That’s the way Turk and his regulars liked it. The ones who hadn’t died off, yet.

Muldoon’s had once been my working sanctuary. A place where I’d kept busy enough to avoid the shadows from my past. Now, three years after I’d left, I was back. Sifting through other people’s shadows for a daily fee.

I led Brianne up an elevated platform to the first leather-clad booth on the left. We sat opposite each other across a polished wood table.

“Why did you order me an IPA?” Brianne asked.

“I’m a gentleman, remember. It was the polite thing to do.”

“Yes.” She tilted her head and looked at me like I was a jigsaw puzzle. “But why not a light beer or something less robust?”

“Was it a bad choice?”

“No. But why?”

“Lucky guess?” I shrugged my shoulders, but she kept giving me the cypher look. “The way you carry yourself. Your confidence. A bit of athletic arrogance in the way you walk.”

“Athletes don’t drink light beer?”

“Maybe, but you struck me as someone who doesn’t like anything watered down.” I pulled a notebook and pen from the inside pocket of my leather jacket. “So, let’s start at the beginning. When, where, and how did your husband die? For right now, use the police version of how.”

“He died two and a half months ago. At home.” She pressed her lips together and shook her head, both eyes set to half-mast. “He was found hanging from a beam in the garage.”

“Did you find him?”

“No.” She looked down at the table for a five count. When her head came up, tears filled up the bottom of her blue eyes. “My son did.”

“I’m sorry. Do you need a moment?”

“No. I’m good.” She blinked a few times and the tears evaporated, leaving behind steeled resolve. “That’s why I’m sure Jim didn’t kill himself.”

“Why is that?”

“Jim would never let Cash be the one to discover his body.”

“Would he let you?”

She hesitated long enough to put a lie to her response. “No.”

“What time of day did your son find him?”

“Around midnight.” She looked down at the table again. Sadness for what her son went through or guilt for not being there first? Both?

“Where were you?”

“At my apartment. Jim and I were separated.”

“Separated, as in getting a divorce? Or, as in figuring it out?”

“Is that relevant?” She leaned forward and gave me the tight lips and the squint.

“It might be.” Her eyes, blue half-moon spotlights, bored into me. I’d looked at worse things in my life. “Losing you might have pushed your husband over the edge. And regarding him not wanting your son to find his body, when you’re spiraling down into that type of depression, you don’t think past just wanting to make the pain stop.”

She relaxed back in her seat. “You sound like you’ve lived through that kind of depression.”

“How long were you and Jim separated?”

“Four months.”

“Four months sounds like you’d gotten it figured out and the next thing to do was sign the papers.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with anything.” She gave me the angry eyes again. “I met you here with the understanding that you’d help me get my husband’s case reopened and, instead, you’re acting just like the police who ruled Jim’s death a suicide.”

“You asked me to find the truth, Mrs. Colton.” I leaned toward her and pushed the bank’s late notices to the back of my mind. “And if I agree to take you on as a client, that’s what I’m going to do. If you want an investigator who will go through the motions and chase your phantoms for a daily fee, I can give you some phone numbers.”

“I want to find the truth, Mr. Cahill.” Her jaw cinched tight.

“Even if the truth turns out to be that your husband committed suicide?”

“I have to know the truth.”

“Okay, then play along with me a bit longer.” I settled back in the booth and scanned the few notes I’d taken. “So, were you two getting a divorce?”

“We’d talked about it but hadn’t decided yet.” She looked down at the table again.

“But you initiated the separation.” My guess was she had decided on divorce, whether she told him or not.

A long enough silence to again answer the question. “Yes. How did you know?”

“Even in today’s world of dual incomes, it’s unusual for the woman to be the one who moves out of the house when a couple separates.” I scribbled a note on the pad. “How often did you see, or talk with, Jim after you left?”

“We talked on the phone a couple times a week about our son. He was about to start his freshman year at UCLA and money was tight.”

“When was the last time you saw Jim?”

“Two weeks before he died.”

“Had your husband been depressed?”

“My husband went through periods of depression over the years, Mr. Cahill.” Brianne tugged at the collar of her sweater like she’d suddenly gotten hot. “But never anywhere near depressed enough to kill himself.”

Her hesitation earlier when I’d asked her if her husband would have allowed her to find his body told me that she’d wrestled with the possibility that her husband had committed suicide. But no need to push that point until I learned more facts about the death.

“Is there anything else that makes you think your husband didn’t kill himself?”

“Jim had guns all over the house. If he was going to kill himself, he’d use a gun.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to make a mess.”

“He was a neat freak, but would have used a gun.” She took a long swig of her beer. “Besides, I’d never seen the rope that . . . that he was hanging from before.”

Maybe Brianne Colton wasn’t just an estranged wife putting denial between her and the guilt she’d feel if she accepted her husband’s death as a suicide. She’d thought it out, and separated or not, no one knows a man better than his wife. But I wasn’t ready to jump onboard, yet.

“Did he have any problems at work? Anything other than your marriage that he could have been depressed about?”

“Sure. Work bothered him sometimes. You, of all people, should understand that.”

“Why?”

“Jim was a cop. I’m sure you remember what it’s like.”

“San Diego PD?”

“No. La Jolla.”

CHAPTER THREE

LA JOLLA PD. Police Chief Tony Moretti and all his men. The man squeezing me whenever he could and the man convinced I'd committed murder.

"Mrs. Colton . . ."

"Brienne."

"Brienne." She'd be back to "Mrs." after she heard me out. "I can't take your case. I'm sorry I made you come down here. I can give you the contact information of a couple investigators who are very good, better than me. I'm confident either can find out the truth about what happened to your husband."

"I don't want any other private investigators." Her eyes went wide. Vulnerable. "I want you."

"I don't have a very good relationship with the La Jolla Police Department. Somebody else would be able to get more information from them than me."

"That's why I want you, Rick. You're not afraid to stand up to LJPD. You won't take what they say at face value."

She was wrong. I was afraid of LJPD. I might not believe what they'd have to say, I just couldn't afford to have the conversation.

"You think you know me because you read some old newspaper articles or Internet stories, but you don't." I suddenly wished I'd taken Pat up on that beer. And about six others. "The articles, the stories, they're not a hundred percent true. I'm not the man they make me out to be."

“Then what kind of man are you?” Her eyes went half-mast again, blue lasers boring into me, searching for some truth that wasn’t there. “I thought you’d understand what I’m going through. Someone murdered your wife eleven years ago and got away with it. Did you just stop caring?”

I felt that pain every day, but it was my pain. Nobody else’s and not for public display.

“I can give you the names of a couple good investigators.” I tilted my head. “I’m sorry I can’t help you, Mrs. Colton.”

“I already hired someone else two months ago.” Her glare could cut glass. “He copied the police report and charged me five thousand dollars. You’re my last hope.”

Everybody has problems. Mine could put me in jail for the rest of my life. Brianne Colton’s was not believing that her estranged husband had committed suicide. My problem was unsolvable. Hers had probably already been solved. She just didn’t like the result.

I wrote the names of two PIs I respected and their phone numbers on my notepad, ripped off the page, and set it down in front of Brianne. “Call either. They’ll be thorough and honest.”

“I know Dan Coyote.” Brianne held the notebook page I’d dropped onto the table in her right hand. “He used to work for LJPD. He’ll back their version. Moira McFarland does mostly workers’ comp cases.”

“You did your homework, but it didn’t tell you everything. Coyote quit LJPD because he didn’t agree with their tactics, especially Moretti’s. He’ll play it straight. Moira McFarland worked with me on the Randall Eddington case last year.” The one where people died. But not because of her. The deaths were on me. “She’s good.”

“Maybe you’re right about both of them, but I can’t afford to make another five-thousand-dollar mistake. I need someone who’s not afraid to take on Chief Moretti and find out what he’s covering

up.” She crumpled the paper in her hand. “Someone I can trust. That’s you.”

I didn’t know why Brianne Colton thought she could trust me. Maybe in today’s world of social media and twenty-four-hour news cycles where Andy Warhol’s prediction became a biblical utterance, people thought they knew someone they’d never met because of some story on the Internet. The only thing the Internet had ever gotten right about me was my age. But her instincts about Moretti were good.

I’d already caught him in a cover-up once. Back when he was just a detective and before he thought I’d murdered somebody. Well, he probably thought I’d murdered my wife but that was years earlier and way out of his jurisdiction. And he wasn’t alone. I’d already been tried and convicted by the press, which made me question Brianne’s trust in me even more.

“Why so much trust, Brianne?” I scanned her eyes looking for something I could believe. Or not believe.

“A friend of mine speaks very highly of you.”

I couldn’t think of many people who would speak highly of me. Bob Reitzmeyer, my old boss at La Jolla Investigations, thought I’d betrayed him, which was close enough to the truth. Turk Muldoon, my former best friend and partner, now avoided me as much as I did him. I worked hard and did a good job for my clients, but most of the time I gave them nothing but bad news. Hard to give a glowing review for the person who confirmed your suspicion and broke your heart by catching your spouse sheet wrestling with someone else.

No. I drew a blank. “Who’s that?”

“Kim Parker.”

“Kim Parker?” I knew both names, first and last, but they didn’t go together.

“Formerly Kim Connelly.” She raised her eyebrows and searched my eyes. “She got married a few months ago. I thought you knew.”

Kim. The woman whose heart I'd broken and who broke mine. With plenty of help from me. I knew she'd moved in with the real estate king, and the Christmas cards stopped coming last year, but I hadn't expected this. Denial only works until reality hits you in the head. Right then, I could have used a helmet. It must have shown.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew." Brianne gently rested her hand on top of mine. A gesture of kindness that startled me. I hadn't felt pure kindness, kindness without a hook hiding within, in so long, I didn't trust it.

"How do you know Kim?" I slid my hand out from under Brianne's and picked up my notepad like I'd missed something important that I'd already written down.

"I sing in a local country band that performs all over San Diego. Kim comes to a lot of our shows. About a year ago, we sort of became friends through osmosis, I guess. I sang at her wedding. She's a great gal."

"I know."

"Anyway, she said I could trust you. That you'd find the truth no matter what and you'd do what was right."

I wasn't sure if I knew what was right anymore. I only knew what was wrong. Moretti and his boys in blue were mostly wrong when it came to me. Did they have anyone else on their hit list? Jim Colton? How far would they go to stop an enemy? Murder?

I wasn't ready to go that far. I couldn't let my feelings for Moretti taint the evidence or my gut instinct, which was that Jim Colton, like so many cops and ex-cops, killed himself. He just chose a rope over eating his own gun.

"Jim never trusted Chief Moretti," she said.

Brianne seemed to be reading my mind. If true, I had to give the deceased credit. He must have had good instincts. Except for the suicide part.

“Why do you think Moretti is covering something up?” I leaned forward.

“When I was finally able to pick up Jim’s belongings, his cell phone was missing.”

“Maybe Jim didn’t have it on him because he’d just gotten up the nerve to kill himself and didn’t want to risk getting a text or a phone call that might change his mind.”

“I checked all over the house and couldn’t find it.” She shook her head. “Either the police took it or the person who killed him did.”

“Did you try to find it with the Find Your Phone feature?”

“Jim didn’t have it set up.”

“Maybe the cops lost it?” Brianne may have been convinced her husband was murdered, but I wasn’t. Not yet. Maybe never.

“Or the killer took it.”

“Why would someone kill your husband and stage it as a suicide? Did he have any enemies?”

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly.” No matter how badly I needed the money, I wouldn’t take it from Brianne Colton, or anyone else, under false pretenses. “There has to be more than a lost phone and Jim choosing a rope over a gun to kill himself.”

“I know Jim was thinking of quitting the force.”

“How does that make him a target for murder?”

“Jim wasn’t a quitter. He’d been a Navy SEAL. They don’t quit because something is difficult.” Her eyes softened and she looked at memories over my shoulder. “He would only quit if he was asked to do something dishonorable or his superior was behaving dishonorably and Jim felt he couldn’t stop him.”

Moretti. Dishonorable. I was surprised Jim Colton had lasted a week on the La Jolla Police Department. But the fact that he had been a SEAL curved the ball a bit. SEALs were the best of the best.

The toughest of the tough, both mentally and physically. If Colton killed himself, something had to have gone way wrong in his life. A pending divorce might have been enough, but I doubted it. And if it hadn't been divorce and there wasn't anything else, Brianne Colton might be right about Jim being murdered.

"What did he do at LJPd?"

"He led the CIT."

Crime Impact Teams are small units in a police force that combat specific crime areas and problems. I briefly worked CIT in Santa Barbara doing parole and probation sweeps before they booted me off the force.

"I didn't know LJPd had a CIT."

"They didn't until Chief Moretti hired Jim to run it three years ago."

"Where was he a cop before La Jolla?"

"He wasn't. He worked for the GRS overseas."

"GRS?" I asked.

"Global Response Staff. A CIA security force."

"Jim worked for the CIA?" Now I was starting to believe.

"No. He was an independent contractor. The CIA uses contractors for most of the security work. CIA agents are in supervisor roles."

"Was he in the Middle East?"

"Yes. His last post was Benghazi."

"Geez. Tough duty." I made a note about Colton's service on my pad. "Was he there during the siege when the ambassador and the others were murdered?"

"Yes. One of the others was Jim's friend." She air quoted "others" and I felt like an ass.

"Jim quit after the attack. He thought the State Department had FUBARed the whole thing and acted dishonorably."

Brianne Colton was definitely a military wife. FUBAR was military slang for Fucked Up Beyond All Repair. My dad had been in

the Navy during Vietnam and carried FUBAR into his career as a cop. And his family.

“Could Jim have made any enemies with fellow contractors or the CIA after the shit went down?” I asked.

“He made his feelings known to his supervisors at the CIA that people had died needlessly, but he didn’t take it any further.” She shook her head. “The independent operators were upset with the State Department, but not each other. They’re all former Special Ops guys. They love each other like brothers.”

I didn’t bother to bring up Cain and Abel.

“Did the medical examiner perform an autopsy?”

“Yes. She determined the cause to be death by strangulation due to hanging.” She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “But that doesn’t mean someone else didn’t put the noose around his neck.”

Maybe. Maybe wishful thinking.

“Anything else you can give me?”

“Well, I don’t know if this means anything or not.” She reached into her buckskin purse and pulled out a manila folder. From the folder, she took a sheet of paper. “This is Jim’s last phone bill with all the calls he made in the month of August.”

Brianne handed the sheet of paper to me. It was a computer printout with a long list of phone numbers next to dates and times. One phone number three quarters of the way down the bill was circled. The date was August twenty-third, five days before Jim Colton died, either by his own hand or someone else’s. Brianne reached over my arm and tapped the circled number. “That’s the number to the local FBI office.”