

**BLOOD
TRUTH**

Also by Matt Coyle

Yesterday's Echo

Night Tremors

Dark Fissures

BLOOD TRUTH

A RICK CAHILL NOVEL

MATT COYLE

OCEANVIEW  PUBLISHING
LONGBOAT KEY, FLORIDA

Copyright © 2017 Matt Coyle

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, businesses, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-60809-239-0

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing

Longboat Key, Florida

www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my brother, Tim Coyle
A person of quiet courage who has inspired me
my whole life*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was made better by the input and support of many people.

My sincere thanks to:

My agent, Kimberley Cameron, for her supreme faith and guidance.

Bob and Pat Gussin, Lee Randall, Emily Baar, Lisa Daily, and Michael Fedison at Oceanview Publishing for raising the bar and continued support.

David Ivester and Ken Wilson for greasing the skids on marketing.

Carolyn Wheat, Cathy Worthington, Grant Goad, Patty Randall Roe, and Penne Horn from the Saturday group for helping to polish the rough spots.

My family, Jan and Gene Wolfchief, Tim and Sue Coyle, Pam and Jorge Helmer, and Jennifer and Tom Cunningham for listening and continuing to get the word out.

Nancy Denton and Jennifer Cunningham for multiple reads.

David Putnam for inside police information.

Dr. D. P. Lyle and Dr. Sally Kim for help with the cardiovascular system and medical insights.

Finally, a banking representative who wishes to remain anonymous, which makes me think I got some great inside info.

Any errors regarding law enforcement, medical issues, or banking procedures are solely the author's.

**BLOOD
TRUTH**

CHAPTER ONE

I HADN'T BEEN to the house since my father's funeral. Eighteen years. I had to go back ten years before that to find a good memory. At least, one that involved my father. I was nine, and Little League baseball tryouts were a few days away. Dad was throwing me ground balls in the backyard. I'd just mowed the lawn down to the nub, and it was playing fast. We had to do twenty-five in a row without an error, including the throw back to him, before we ended practice. Sometimes it took fifteen minutes, sometimes an hour. Sometimes we had to clip a portable spotlight with a long extension cord to the eaves of the garage to hold back the night.

That day, we were on a roll. Ten in a row. Clean. Fifteen. Clean. After twenty, my dad grabbed a handful of gravel from the walkway between the garage and the concrete slab on the side of the house where we kept the trashcans. He sprinkled the gravel three feet in front of me. He told me bad hops were a part of baseball.

A part of life.

Number twenty-one caught a pebble, took a bad hop, and the ball ricocheted off my chest. I snatched the ball off the ground and fired a strike to my dad's first basemen's glove to beat the clock ticking in his head. Twenty-two missed the pebbles. Clean. Twenty-three hit a pebble and stayed low, but I gloved it and whipped the ball to my dad. Clean. Twenty-four skidded dead right, but I backhanded it and made the throw. Clean.

Twenty-five clipped a pebble and shot straight up into my mouth. I fell to the ground on my back and grabbed my mouth with my right hand. Blood. Tears. Error. Dad hustled over, knelt down over me, and wiped my lip with his handkerchief. It stung and kept bleeding. He helped me up and started to walk me to the house.

I let go of his hand and wiped tears from my eyes and blood from my lip. "We didn't make twenty-five in a row."

"I think we can skip that today." He smiled, towering over me.

"No. We can't quit just because things get hard." I parroted the saying he'd told me since I could first understand words. I believed the words. They were engrained in my psyche, my DNA. But my mouth hurt and the blood scared me and I wanted to quit. More than anything, though, I wanted my dad to be proud of me.

"Okay, but just one more. That one took a bad hop and wouldn't have been ruled an error." He patted my ball cap.

"Twenty-five in a row."

We finished an hour later under the spotlight hanging from the eaves.

* * *

My mother sold the house three months after the funeral. Dad had died years before the bottle finally killed him. After he "retired" without a pension from the La Jolla Police Department, my mother

moved to Arizona with the man she began seeing while she and Dad were estranged. I'd been to Arizona twice in eighteen years.

The neighborhood had changed a lot since I'd last been there. Every house but one in the cul-de-sac had either been remodeled or torn down and rebuilt. The lone holdout was the house I'd grown up in. Even that was about to change.

The house was laid bare, stripped down to the studs and concrete slab. New owners had bought it from the family my mother sold it to. Looked like they wanted to make the most of the La Jolla zip code and take the tract out of the tract home I'd grown up in. Bigger. Better. Modern. They'd framed up to two stories so they'd get a glimpse of the bay down the hill two miles away. What was a house in La Jolla without a view?

Just a childhood with some good memories buried beneath the bad.

I got out of my car and walked through the open gate of the temporary chain-link fence that encircled the house. The afternoon sun cast a shadowed grid onto the ground. A couple of construction workers were putting up drywall in the family room. Or where the family room used to be. I walked over to the porch and the front door opening. I knocked on the side of the frame. One of the drywallers stepped back and looked at me. Blond, buff. Probably surfed the daylight hours he didn't work.

"This is a construction site. You can't be in here." No anger, just stating the facts.

"I've got an appointment with the new owner, Bob Martin." I had my own facts.

"Mr. Cahill." A voice came from behind the tar-papered framing of the garage. A tall man appeared. Midforties, short curly brown hair. Wire-rim glasses. Looked like an architect, which he probably was. Tear down, build up, and flip. We shook hands.

"The item I called you about is out in the back."

I followed him through the garage into the backyard. A worker cut wood on a table saw on the lawn where I used to play catch with my dad. There were no eaves to clamp a spotlight. There would be soon. Different eaves.

Bob led me over to a makeshift table of composite wood laid over two sawhorses. Blueprints were spread out next to a wall safe without a wall connected to it.

“Here it is.” He pointed at the safe. “Found it in the closet of the smallest bedroom.”

My father’s den. No one had been allowed in there. Not even my mother. When I was eight or nine, I found my dad’s extra set of keys in his bedroom dresser while he was at work. I sneaked into the den and found a ledger with dates and dollar amounts written down in the closet. Nothing else interesting. I didn’t remember a wall safe. It wasn’t until years later that I figured out that the ledger contained payoff amounts from the mob. Probably for my dad. I’d always held out hope they’d been for someone else, but hope is often just a lie you tell yourself to avoid the truth.

“Thanks.” I walked over to the makeshift table.

The safe was about eighteen by fifteen inches and three or four inches deep.

“It was hidden inside a false wall behind a shelving unit.” He smiled like he’d just opened King Tut’s tomb. I doubted I’d find any treasure inside. “The last owners didn’t even know it was there. My realtor found your mother and late father’s names as the original owners. Your mother told me to call you.”

He did. She didn’t. Fine by me. My mother did tell me that whatever was in the safe was mine and she didn’t need to know its contents. Through an e-mail. The intimacy of modern technology.

The safe was beige and had a round dial combination lock in the middle of the door. I’d been paid cash out of wall safes a few times

for my job as a private investigator. They all had digital keypad locks. This safe was probably at least twenty-five years old, which would fit into my father's time frame.

"Can I pay you for your trouble?" I asked Bob Martin.

"Oh, no." He smiled. "It wasn't any trouble at all. I just hope there's either something valuable in there or a keepsake that will bring back some good memories."

I wasn't sure the safe was old enough to contain any good memories. I thanked Martin and picked up the safe. Heavy. Weighed about twenty-five pounds.

The past weighed a lot more.

CHAPTER TWO

MY BLACK LAB, Midnight, met me at the front door of Cahill Investigations' home office. Also known as my home. I was the agency's owner, investigator, and sole employee. Kept complaints about the boss down to a minimum. Business had been good for a while. I'd been the news media hero of the week about a year back and it had been a marketing bonanza. If the media had dug deeper, I could have been the villain of the week. That might have been even better for marketing.

I was between jobs right now, but not worried about making my monthly nut like I would have been a year ago. I had savings. I had options. I had a twenty-five-year-old safe without its combination from my late father's den.

The safe. I knew how to pick a lock on a door, but not a safe. The pick set I kept in the trunk of my car would be of no use. I lugged the safe upstairs to my office. Midnight followed me and found his spot under my desk. My cell phone rang while I checked my mental Rolodex for former clients who could crack a safe. None.

I looked at the incoming call.

Kim.

My ex-girlfriend whom I hadn't talked to in almost two years. Since she'd gotten married.

I answered.

“Rick?” She used to call me Ricky. The only person who’d ever tried. Her voice had a slight nervous waver. My stomach, the same.

“Kim. How’s married life?” My voice, cooler than I’d intended, covered up my stomach’s nerves. And the pang in my chest.

“Fine.” Flat. “I’m hoping you can help me.”

“Of course. What do you need?”

“I mean I want to hire you.”

“Oh.” I had a rule to never fall for a client. I wondered if that included taking on a client who’d I’d already fallen for earlier in life. My life, my rules. “Well, I’m a little, kinda, ah, I could give you contact info for someone who’s really good.”

“This probably wasn’t a good idea. I’ll find someone on my own. I hope you’re well.”

“No, wait.” I didn’t have a rule that said I couldn’t help a friend. “Whatever you need.”

“Okay.” An inhale. “Could we talk about it in person?”

“Sure.” I wanted to see her. But I didn’t want to see her. I didn’t want to be reminded of the life I let slip away. “I meet with clients at Muldoon’s. Turk lets me use a booth if the restaurant’s not too busy. Can you meet me there at six tonight?”

“Yes.” It sounded like a question. She may have been trying to figure out what she’d tell her husband to get away.

Her husband. Not my problem.

* * *

Muldoon’s Steak House sat on Prospect Street, La Jolla’s restaurant row. It hadn’t changed much in the forty-plus years it held up the north end of the row. Square concrete building in a sea of modern remodels. It withstood the waves of trends that restaurants in the area

had tried and discarded. Muldoon's was an old-school steak house, family owned. Run by Turk Muldoon.

My onetime partner. And one-time best friend.

I walked inside the dimly lit entry at 5:55 p.m. Turk manned the hostess station. Still a massive man who was an all-conference line-backer at UCLA twenty years ago. But he looked thinner than the last time I'd seen him. And older. Gray pinched in on his curly red hair around the temples. His once cherubic face now drawn back to finally show his age. Years spent leaning against a walking cane can do that. The fact that he could stand upright at all was a near-miracle. The doctors thought Turk would live the rest of his life in a sitting position when they extracted the bullet wedged against his spine four years ago.

The night he saved my life.

"Rick." He forced a smile. "You here to meet with a client or have dinner?"

"Client." I forced a smile of my own.

"Booth four is available." He pointed his cane toward the dining room. "You know the way."

"Thanks." I started for the dining room, relieved our conversation was over.

"How will I know your client?" His voice over my shoulder stopped me. "Will he ask for you?"

"She." I turned back toward him. "It's Kim. You can just send her back. Thanks."

"Connelly?" Turk's eyebrows rose. He always liked Kim. He never understood why I broke up with her. With each passing year, neither did I.

"Parker."

"That's right. I remember hearing she got married." No mirth in his eyes. Maybe a hint of sadness. He knew better than most how life can change for the worse in an instant.

“Yeah. She got married.”

I went into the dining room I used to run four years ago, and hid in booth four.

Kim appeared a few minutes later. She wore a green silk blouse that made her emerald eyes pop. Her blond hair swept off her face, she looked every bit the successful realtor she was. But tired. And worried. And still beautiful.

My breath tightened. I pushed down feelings that didn't belong to me anymore. Feelings I didn't know I still had. Feelings I missed.

I slid out of the booth and stood up. I didn't know whether to extend my hand for a shake or close in for a hug. Kim didn't, either. Finally, we stepped into an embrace. Awkward at first. Then close, warm, and long. And filled with memories.

“You look good, Rick. How have you been?” The smile that caught my eye eight years ago and, through everything since, had never let go. Wide, bright, light sparkling in her green eyes. I realized right then how much I'd missed it.

“Fine. Congratulations on your marriage.” Her husband was the biggest realtor in La Jolla. His smiling mug was on every bus bench in town.

Kim looked down at the table. “I didn't know if I should send you an invite.”

“It's okay. I'm happy for you.” I was. Even as I kicked myself, I was happy for Kim. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I wasn't.

“I saw you on the news last year.” She looked up from the table. “I almost called. I didn't know what to say. I'm glad you're okay.”

“Thanks.” I remembered hoping at the time she would call. And feeling stupid about it. “Why do you need a private investigator?”

“I hope I don't, really.” Her eyes grabbed the table again. “I want you to follow Jeffrey.”

“Your husband?” This could turn ugly.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” She looked up, face tight.

I knew why, but she had to tell me. Not to make her feel bad, but because that’s how I ran my business. Everything had to be spelled out. No surprises. When the truth came out hard and raw, I didn’t want the client to try and turn the ugliness back onto me. Even if I was just doing a favor for a friend.

“It has to come from you.”

“I think he’s having an affair.” Her lips pinched together and her nose twitched. “Did you have to make me say it out loud?”

“Yes, I did. I’m sorry.” My cheeks blossomed heat. “Why do you think he’s having an affair?”

“Things could have been different, Rick.” Liquid collected in the bottom of her eyes. “You pushed me away. You never let me in.”

Kim was right. She never understood that I wasn’t good enough for her, and I never saw her as an equal to the idolized memory I had of my late wife, Colleen. No one ever could be. Not even Colleen. But none of that mattered now.

“I’m asking these questions because it’s my job. It’s how I get to the truth. Sometimes people think their spouses are having affairs when there’s an innocent explanation.” Not often, and sometimes it’s because of some other deceit.

“I found a second cell phone.”

“Some people have one phone for personal use and one for work.”

“Not realtors. We’re on call twenty-four seven. And I found a text message to someone named Sophia.”

“What did the text say?” Kim’s answer could make this an open and shut case.

“He asked this Sophia if everything was on schedule. She didn’t reply.”

“That could be about anything.” Maybe not so open and shut after all. “Did you ask him about it?”

“No. I can’t.” She shook her head. “I’ve already caught him in a lie once. I couldn’t stand to see him lie to my face again.”

“What was the lie?”

“We were supposed to have lunch together at George’s at the Cove a few days ago, but Jeffrey canceled at the last second because he had to show a property in Del Mar to one of our top clients.” The unspent tears had dried up, but the angry flush came back into her cheeks. “I kept the reservation and went to lunch by myself. As soon as I sat down, I noticed the client Jeffrey was supposedly meeting sitting at a table twenty feet from me. I went over and asked him if he was meeting Jeffrey later. He said no. When I asked Jeffrey how the meeting went later that night, he said it went okay.”

“You’re sure it was the same client?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t confront Jeffrey about it?”

“No. I stood there and let him lie to me. I’ve never felt so small.”

“So, you’d rather I get you proof before you confront him? Wouldn’t it be easier to tell him about the phone and the lunch and hash things out? It will hurt, but trust me, it hurts less than getting a third party involved taking pictures in the dark.”

“I can’t. But I need to know right now.”

“Okay. I’ll look into it. Why the rush?”

“I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER THREE

I'D BEEN FOLLOWING Jeffrey Parker in his white Lexus LS for two days. I hadn't caught him in the arms of another woman, but I had seen some of the grandest real estate in La Jolla. Made me wish I had an extra five or six mil lying around. None of the properties Parker showed had For Sale signs out front. He had a wealth of pocket listings. Luxurious homes where he got first dibs.

Parker and a client emerged from a house overlooking the beach on Sea Lane. Not quite Malibu a hundred fifty miles up the coast, but you still had the ocean for a backyard and even got a front yard as a bonus. I sat in my car and watched Parker from up the block. Gray slacks, white shirt, no tie, navy blazer. Tall, three or four inches over me. Fit. Square jaw. I understood why Kim chose him instead of waiting for me to figure things out. I just didn't understand why she took so long to make the choice.

The client, a thirtyish playboy, drove off in a Maserati. Parker locked up, then got into his car. He headed toward La Jolla Boulevard.

I grabbed my cell phone off the car's console and tapped a number. "He's coming your way."

"Roger. I'll duck and cover and follow after you."

"Check."

Moira MacFarlane had been a PI longer than I had, and was damn good at it. She ran solo, like me, and we sometimes teamed up when one of us had a multiple-day surveillance gig. Two cars gave the subject different looks when he checked his rearview mirror. We both drove newish Honda Accords, the most popular car in Southern California. Ubiquitous on the streets of San Diego County. Even in high-end La Jolla. Moira's was white, the most popular color. I drove black, number two on the list. It blended better with the night.

I pictured Moira ducking below the dashboard and chuckled. She didn't have to duck down too far. She barely stood five feet tall but had an attitude that would fill up an NBA number-one draft pick. We'd met after a lawyer, unbeknownst to me, promised her a job then gave it to me instead. She tracked me down and showed me that attitude up close. We settled things over a couple beers, but every time we met since, she'd still greet me with a giant chip on her tiny shoulder.

I didn't have that many friends. I couldn't unfriend one of them just because she acted like she hated me.

Parker turned right onto La Jolla Boulevard, not left, which would take him back to his office in the village.

I followed him with Moira in tow. He headed south toward Bird Rock, the tail end of La Jolla. Plenty of expensive homes down there with ocean views to show clients. Except he rolled right through, down to Mission Boulevard into Pacific Beach. PB was a few hundred grand lower in zip code than La Jolla, but it still had enough million-dollar homes to interest Parker Real Estate. A rookie agent though, not the boss.

Parker made a right on Missouri Street and drove past apartment complexes and condos. He headed toward the end of the street, which dead-ended at the ocean after a block. My gut turned over. Unless Parker had made a wrong turn or intended to park and stare at

the ocean, he had two potential destinations. Both hotels. He turned left into the underground parking lot of The Pacific Terrace Hotel.

“Shit.”

“What?” Moira’s voice jarred me. I’d forgotten I had her on speakerphone during the drive. Lost in my dread of what a hotel meant. One that was hidden from La Jolla but close enough for easy access. I tried to lie to myself that maybe Parker was just meeting a client from out of town. The lie didn’t take.

Jeffrey Parker was meeting a woman.

“Nothing. Bust it into that garage. We have to find out who he’s meeting.”

I drove to the dead end and parked illegally in front of the low steel barrier that protected the sidewalk from the road. Moira swooped into the underground parking lot. I tugged my ball cap low, hopped out of the car, and ran around to the front entrance of the hotel. I’d never met Jeffrey Parker, but he knew who I was. Years ago, when he and Kim were just dating, they’d had conversations about me. He wasn’t a fan. My face had been in the news enough over the past couple years for Parker to find out what I looked like.

I hustled through the upscale, fern-dotted lobby toward the door to the stairwell and went through it. I plugged my earbuds into my phone as I ran up the stairs. The Pacific Terrace only had three stories, but most of the rooms had decks that faced the ocean. Not the normal hookup dive I was used to when I worked the adultery detail.

I guess when you were the King of La Jolla Real Estate, the view outside the sin room was almost as important as the one inside.

“The elevator went up to the third floor.” Moira’s voice buzzed in my ears as I hit the second-floor landing. My instincts had been correct. Only the top floor for Jeffrey Parker.

“Were you on the elevator with him?” I huffed out the words as I pumped up the last flight of stairs.

“No.”

“Go back to your car and wait.” I didn’t have time for further elaboration.

“Yes, sir. Asshole.” She hung up.

I opened the door to the third floor of rooms three inches and peeked out. The hallway was empty, but I heard the click of a door being closed. I walked about midway down the hall and estimated that the sound had come from room 310. I looked up and down the hall to make sure no one could see me, then put my ear to the door. No murmured conversation, just the whooshing equalization of my own eardrum.

I took the elevator down, exited the hotel, and jogged back to my car. No parking ticket. Yet. A spot had opened up a few cars away while I was in the hotel. I jumped in my car and nabbed it before someone else could. Parking spaces in Pacific Beach were as scarce as in La Jolla.

I punched Moira’s number.

“Would you mind meeting me out on the street?” I tried to sound pleasant.

“You’re an asshole. I’ll be right there.”

“Could you bring your sun hat with you?”

“Roger.”

I opened the trunk of the Accord and unzipped a large duffel bag, then pulled out my tools of deception. A pair of white shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, a Pittsburgh Steelers ball cap, and my Nikon DSLR camera. A lot of PIs used video cameras these days. I preferred the stark, frozen images of life. I got back into the car and changed, then emerged as a tourist awestruck by the beauty of San Diego. The beauty I let slip into the background all too often in my everyday life.

Moira emerged from the parking garage wearing rolled-up Levis, showing off her shapely calves, flip-flops, a tank top, and a floppy sun hat that shaded her silver-dollar brown eyes.

“You’re too tan,” I said.

“You’re not.” She looked at my Irish legs. “Besides, women go to tanning booths all over the country. Even here.”

“You’re right.”

I led her over the knee-high barrier at the dead end onto the sidewalk. We took a wooden staircase down to the flat sandy beach below the hotel. The beach was empty save for a few couples walking down by the shore. I glanced over my shoulder up at the third floor of the hotel and saw the balcony of the suite in the dead center. Empty.

Moira and I walked diagonally across the beach cutting in front of the hotel. We headed down to the water, and I took peeks back at the balcony. Still empty.

“Okay. Do your thing.” I lifted the camera hanging from the strap around my neck and pointed it at Moira.

She made goofy poses in front of the water, and I pretended to take pictures of her. She moved away from the ocean so she was now between me and the hotel. I aimed the camera above her at room 310’s balcony and zoomed the lens. Jeffrey Parker came into view sitting in a lounge chair. Alone. Was he renting the room as a getaway crash pad? Maybe the crown did weigh heavily on the king.

A flash of movement behind him. Someone handed him a glass of wine. I shifted the camera and caught a woman. Thirties. Beautiful.

Wearing a silk robe.