

“There be some crazy surfers down there in La Jolla—real crazy.”

-----Tom Wolfe, Author, *The Pumphouse Gang*

Chapter 1

It was thirteen days before the 4th of July in 1973 when I first saw her. I was standing on a sidewalk beside the road west of the old beach house that I had just rented in La Jolla. Across the road was the separate sidewalk above the ocean, where she was walking south with her dog. To the west of her, down a twenty-foot bluff, was the Pacific Ocean and the several score of beach-goers waiting for the sun to dip into the sea. Adjacent to her sidewalk, there was a sewage pumping station built into the cliff, with its footings secured into the rocks beside the beach sand. She walked languidly, seemingly carefree, wearing one of those white summer dresses that stopped at her elbows and cut above her knees, streaked with red and green and blue colors of a vibrant summer day. White skin, long-black hair loosely tied up behind her head, she moved like an insouciant cat on a promenade walking behind a small white dog. This was my first day and pretty soon night, in the neighborhood, and I wondered if she regularly walked her dog along this sidewalk.

As she moved past the Pumphouse, I saw several surfers standing there, engaged in conversation with one another. When her dog pranced past the surfers, I heard some comments muffled by the sounds of the sea. When she strolled past, they stopped talking and admired her. As she got closer to me, I could tell she was pretty. Not movie star pretty, but a natural beauty which emanated from her white skin and black hair, and the way she carried herself. I put on some Aviator sunglasses so that I

could follow her walk by shifting my eyes without turning my head, which would make my interest too obvious. But maybe she cultivated the attention. Eyes enclosed behind my Ray-Ban Aviators, they moved laterally as she followed her dog along the sidewalk.

A chubby short man adorned in expensive shorts and gold necklaces approached her from the opposite direction and he must've said something which I couldn't hear, for suddenly the dog was barking and yacking and threatening to fight the man. He threw up his arms and slid past the dog and her, escaping north along the sidewalk and past the surfers who ridiculed him with faux fear of throwing their arms into the air and shrieking. I chuckled to myself. I thought I recognized Brick Gibson in the group. A well-known surfer. I knew my dog still housed in LA would have the same reaction to the ostentatious golden-man.

The dog walked point for another ten feet and then she made an indiscernible noise with her lips and the dog stopped. Discipline. I watched her check the traffic on the street as one car drove past and then she made another soft noise, like a short note from a songbird, and the dog and her stepped into the street and proceeded to walk directly toward me. I didn't know what to make of it. I thought maybe the dog had to take a crap and it was going to do it on the brown grass fronting my newly rented home. I was surprised when dog and lady stepped up the curb and stood right in front of me and she casually said,

“You must be Steinway?” She wasn't wearing the *de rigueur* sunglasses and her turquoise eyes dazzled me. I removed my Aviators out of politeness and for a cleaner perception.

“That's me.” I didn't think I'd ever seen this girl before. I couldn't tell her age. Her skin was the color of fresh cream, flawless with just a brush of make-up. Maybe my age, twenty-six, but she looked younger. Not a typical California beach girl. Looked like some Asian bloodlines, probably a mixture with some white blood.

Ancestors could be Vietnamese or running up to China with her high cheekbones and coal colored hair tied back with loose strands behind her ears and down to her shoulders. She used discretion with the California sun and her skin was unblemished. She must walk the dog only at dusk. Figured she must get carded at all the bars or drinking establishments that she frequented.

“My name is Ariel Flagg.” Her name meant nothing to me. She held out her hand and I took it. Her fingers were warm and her hand was strong. Athletic with looks. Probably a tennis player from the feel of calluses during our grip. She was a few inches shorter than me, putting her at five ten.

“This is Sweetie.” The dog’s head reached my shins.

I said, “glad to meet you and your dog.” I didn’t lean down to pet the dog. I never liked poodles. She studied my face for a moment.

“Now I remember you. From about eleven years ago. I remember seeing you playing golf at the Country Club.” She looked away and mumbled under her breath, “I was so young then.” Weren’t we both, I thought.

Was she a golfer? If so, why would she want to watch my sweeping slice that would land 220 yards off the tee? Not that I couldn't get a good score. I learned how to work the slice, how to set it down in a good position for my next shot. Good short game. Pitching from 75 yards out and making most of the putts under 10 feet. Learned from the professional at the Country Club, Paul Runyan. He got my handicap down to five and I played on the high school golf team during the winter and spring months. Of course the top three golfers on the team were scratch players, so when I played in matches, I was always the fifth or sixth player on a six-man team.

“Yeah, our team used to have our home matches up there every Friday.” I couldn’t place this girl in my past. She couldn’t have been a teen-ager that far back so I never would have noticed her. But then I wasn’t into girls when I was in high school. I was fifteen when I graduated and too mixed up in the Protestant religion and

the sexual confusion of a teenage boy surfing the beaches of La Jolla with the mixture of good waves and scantily clad women whose cleavage dared you to dream.

She came back to the present and said, “is your family a member of the Club?”

“No, I’m the only one that really played golf and my parents did all their socializing at the Church.”

“Too bad.” Disappointment in her voice. “Where have you been living?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Why’d you come back?”

Very direct lady and her summer colors made me vulnerable. “I missed La Jolla,” and it slipped out, “lonely. I guess,” and I quickly followed with, “La Jolla is a special town.” She nodded, whether to my loneliness or the town, I didn’t know and I wasn’t about to ask.

Sweetie nudged her ankle and she looked down and petted the dog and smiled. The smile was still on her face when she looked back up at me. She was beautiful and I could tell she loved her dog and then the smile left as she said, “my family lives just north of here, right on the beach at Whispering Sands Court. French Colonial on the ocean.”

“You talking about north of the White Sands Rest Home. Cul-de-sac at the south end of Prospect Street with a public path leading down to the beach?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I imagine you have surfed those waves?” I gathered from her tone that with another person she would’ve said, “surfed our waves.”

“Your home overlooks the reef at Horseshoe. I grew up in this town. Me and my friends surfed every break, every reef, along the shore.” She smiled at me, but this time her smile didn’t have the naturalness of her beauty. It seemed like she had to work for it. Or maybe other people had to work for it. She studied my face for a bit and said, “you look better now.”

“Old age took away my pimples and braces.”

“That too,” she said. “But you’re taller, broader at the shoulders.” It didn’t sound like a compliment, just an observation. “You look a little like one of those movie actors.”

I touched my nose. “I broke this when I was seventeen, so sometimes people take me for a stunt double.” She nodded and got down to her business.

“My father has a legal problem that he needs to talk to somebody about.” Her demeanor had changed. Her warmth left with her smile. I remembered these Princesses from growing up in La Jolla. It seemed their birthright was to be taken care of their entire lives. Beach houses on both coasts and the Mediterranean. Sun Valley chalet. Private Schools. Club memberships. Trust funds set up and just waiting to entice a malleable male into their web. “My sister heard that you were back in town. She suggested you to my father and he agreed to talk with you.” Two girls in the family. Were they both beautiful?

“Well, I don’t expect your father needs my kinda lawyer.” She didn’t respond, so I continued, “and I don’t know too much about business law or trusts.”

“Yes,” she said. Undeterred.

“Those aren’t my expertise.”

She studied me for many seconds. “You’re a criminal lawyer. Right?”

“That’s my specialty.”

“You’re the one he wants to talk to. He seems to think some business partner is breaking the law.” Finality in her voice. Like I didn’t have a choice to decline the invitation. No, it wasn’t an invitation, it was a mandate. Ariel Flagg put out her hand to me. It was cooler now and I noticed the calluses were thicker. More sports in her life to keep her busy. Maybe the evening breeze closed her down. Women get funny like that. She dropped the walking part of the leash down to the dog’s bejeweled neck collar and secured the swivel. The collar looked like pearls. Probably five times the

value of my car. Affluence always walked around this town, mostly under wraps. Beverly Hills and Malibu had nothing up on La Jolla.

A new ragtop Mercedes drove past and she waved to it with her free hand and then turned back to me.

“Come by at 8:15 tonight. Just after dark.”

“OK. Thank you.”—my parents grew up during the depression and they taught us to be thankful to people—until they done you wrong.

“Be punctual. My father has a busy schedule. Ring the bell at the front gate and somebody will let you in.” She forced a smile, looked at my new home and said,

“you should have your landlord straighten out those shutters hanging loose over the windows. Security measures to keep the beach riff-raff out.”

She turned toward the ocean, checked there was no traffic running along the street, and walked over to the sidewalk where she unleashed the poodle. The dog walked point going north, she walked in her colors behind her, and they never looked back. Going home was my guess. She looked good from behind. I watched her stroll past the Pump House. So did the surfers. She diminished in the distance. I wondered if she knew my first name, Rudy, or if she even cared.

She was right. My house was built in the 30s and forty years of salt air and battering from winter storms had left it dilapidated. But I didn't care that the sea air slipped through the broken caulking and blistered wood of the windows and doors; it provided constant ventilation and I liked that. I loved the idea of sleeping beside the sea and smelling the ocean. I wondered if the dolphins knew I was back in town.

I walked back into the house near the hallway to the bathroom. When I did a walk-through before signing the lease, I had seen what looked like a trapdoor cut into the ceiling to access the attic. I got a chair and stepped on it, and pushed against a 2 1/2' x 2 1/2' piece of plywood that was painted the same color as the full ceiling. It released upward for about six inches and then I moved it off to the side within the

attic above me. I straightened up and stuck my head through the entrance and surveyed the rafters and underside of the roof that covered the attic. I thought this would be a good place to store private things and keep it closed so no one would know of its service.

I pulled the cover back in place, stepped down, put the chair back in the living room, and sat down on the couch to listen to the ocean and speculate as to what Mr. Flagg wanted to talk about.

