

## KILLER SWELL

### CHAPTER ONE

Marilyn Crier peered in the window, and I knew the past was about to kick me in the ass.

I was sitting at a small table near the front of The SandDune, a cramped and noisy bar in Mission Beach, a block north of the old roller coaster and a block east of the Pacific Ocean. The pub is sandwiched between ten other beach-themed saloons on Mission Boulevard and draws the same crowds. Half yuppie, half nowhere to go. Everyone is tan, the floors are covered with sand and peanut shells and you can't hear the ocean over the din of music and conversation. But on good nights, you can smell the salt in the air.

Marilyn had called me and said she needed a private investigator. She didn't mention that we hadn't seen each other in over a decade, that she'd despised me when I dated her daughter in high school, nor that she'd orchestrated our breakup.

Had to admit I was curious.

We agreed to meet at the SandDune because she said it was on her way home. I couldn't figure out how that might be true, as she didn't work and she lived on the wealthiest side of Mt. Soledad over in La Jolla, a world away from the beer and party crowd of the San Diego beach bars. But it was only a couple of blocks from my apartment and I didn't have to put away my surfboard too early in order to meet her at seven.

I was sipping my beer and following the Padre's game on the television monitors when I spotted Marilyn Crier outside the window.

She glanced up above the faux saloon doors, probably checking to make sure she was in the right place. Her green eyes were identical to her daughter's, pale and deep. She looked back in the window and I waved at her, rising out of my chair. She stared at me for a moment, as if making sure it was me, then nodded and came into the bar. Her red Chanel suit was as out of place as a cat in a giraffe's mouth, but she didn't seem to notice.

She stood at my table, her thin lips in a tight smile. "Noah Braddock," she said, shaking her head slightly. "You haven't changed at all."

I had but not in ways Marilyn Crier would notice. I did after all look pretty much the same, just a little older. I was in a navy t-shirt and white cotton shorts, worn leather sandals on my feet. My hair style hadn't changed since high school, still cut short for low maintenance. And I knew she was thinking my tan was too dark for me to be working hard. She had said something similar to me when I was eighteen but I couldn't recall her exact words.

We shook hands and I gestured at the empty wooden chair across from me. She continued to look at me as she sat down, silently sizing me up. I did the same. Her blond hair was still blond, no trace of gray despite the fact that she had to be in her mid-fifties my now. It was cut short, blunt, tucked behind her ears. She was still petite, like her daughter, and she reminded me of those plastic looking news anchors you see on television.

"Mrs. Crier," I said, smiling. "It's good to see you."

She laughed quietly, waving a perfectly manicured hand in my direction. “Noah. I think it’s okay if you call me Marilyn now. You’re not in high school anymore.”

I shrugged. Old habits. You should always be polite to the parents of the girl you desperately want to have sex with in high school.

The girl behind the bar came over and Marilyn ordered a glass of white wine. The girl didn’t laugh, but I figured she might be gone awhile trying to find a bottle.

Marilyn eyed the inhabitants at the bar for a moment and then looked at me, clearing her throat. “Are you living down here?”

I recognized the condescension in her voice, but ignored it. “Couple blocks down, on Jamaica.”

“You were a surfer weren’t you?”

“Still am.”

She nodded, again taking in my appearance. “I guess you are.”

The waitress came back with the glass of wine. I wondered where she found the glass. Marilyn tasted the wine, didn’t spit it out and placed her purse in her lap, settling in. “I’ll try not to waste your time, Noah,” she said, folding her hands on the table. “Kate is missing.”

Hearing Kate’s name did something to my stomach. I hadn’t seen her since she’d left for college. She’d headed off to Princeton, I’d stayed around to go to San Diego State. In the eleven years since I’d last seen her, I hadn’t forgotten Kate Crier.

“Kate’s missing,” I repeated, turning the beer glass slowly on the table.

Marilyn nodded tersely. “For about a week. She came down for the Fourth. We went to Catalina, did some shopping, things seemed normal.”

Kate and I had gone to the Crier family’s Catalina Island condo on prom night. And she broke my heart there two months later.

“She was supposed to catch a plane to go home to San Francisco on the eighth,” Marilyn continued, the lines at the corners of her mouth tightening. “But she didn’t.”

A dull roar went up from the bar and I glanced up at the TV. Padres had scored. First time in July.

“She didn’t get on the plane?” I asked, looking back to her.

She shook her head, the pearls in her earlobes jiggling. “No. Randall called when she didn’t arrive in San Francisco.”

“Randall?”

Marilyn took another micro sip from the glass and fixed her eyes on mine. “Kate’s husband.”

I raised my eyebrows. "Ah."

"He's a doctor in the Bay area," she said.

She didn't need to add "and you're not." Her tone implied it.

I tried to be mature. "But she didn't get on the plane?"

Marilyn nodded. "I checked with the airline. She was never checked in."

The crowd at the bar groaned and I glanced up to see the end of the double play finishing the Padres half of the inning. That was more like it.

"I got your name from Jack Meyers," Marilyn told me, leaning slightly forward. "He said you assisted him a year ago. He said you're very good."

I'd found Jack Meyers' wife screwing his attorney after three nights of trailing her. When I told him, he thanked me profusely, placed her clothes in a cardboard box and lit the box on fire. We watched the burning mass float in his backyard pool as he wrote me a check.

I wondered if it hurt for Marilyn Crier to admit that I was good at something. I knew it had to hurt to be sitting in a bar with me.

"So you want me to find her," I said, finishing my beer and setting the mug on the table. "Find Kate."

She stared at me for a moment, perhaps trying to make me squirm like she had when I was in high school. I resisted the urge.

"Noah, I know you don't like me," she said, her eyes even and her voice flat. "But you don't have to like me to help me. I recognized your name when Jack mentioned it. I need an investigator and I figured it might be helpful to have someone do this who knows Kate. Things may not have worked out with Kate way back when..."

"And that just crushed you, didn't it, Marilyn?" I said, smiling, but not bothering to warm it up. "I mean, I know you just dreamed of having me for a son-in-law."

She paused for a moment, then folded her hands on the table. "As I was saying, your relationship with Kate didn't work out. But I know you cared about Kate. And I was hoping that still might count for something."

Another groan went up at the bar, but I didn't look up. I stared at Marilyn Crier, but saw Kate's face. The one that had made high school bearable for me. The face that I used to look to for sympathy as I sat on the bench during high school basketball games. The face attached to the first female body that I saw naked. The face that crushed me that night on Catalina. The face that was going to let my past do a little ass kicking.

So against my better judgment, I told Marilyn Crier that my caring for her daughter did, in fact, still count for something.