



Murder at Cuyamaca Beach

Excerpt

We squeezed into a place close to the pier, earning dirty looks from other Polar Bears. The DJ yelled the two-minute warning and an invading army of dippers surged forward. The noise plugged my ears and, without glasses, everything looked fuzzy.

“You okay?” my husband Mike shouted, grabbing my hand.

“I guess.”

“Go!” The gun sounded and the crowd gave a mighty roar. Mike pulled me along and we dashed toward the water, fighting to keep people from breaking through our locked hands. Let me tell you, I have never felt anything so cold as that ocean—like plunging into a bath of ice water. Waves surged around my ankles, my knees, my waist and suddenly I couldn't breathe.

I yanked on Mike's hand. “That's far enough.” I had to force the words out. I froze, afraid to go forward because of the depth, and afraid to turn back because of the encroaching mob. This was so much worse than I'd imagined.

Mike looked at me, I swear for the first time since we entered the water, now lapping at my chest. I clutched his hand in a death grip. “What's wrong?” he asked.

While I fumed over the question, a breaking wave knocked me sideways. Our locked hands broke apart. I flailed about, unable to see or get my bearings; I felt a tug on my legs, pulling me out to sea. Now pounding waves covered my head and water rushed into my mouth. The briny liquid scalded my nose and throat and froze the breath in my chest.

This is what it's like to die.

And then, strong arms were scooping me up, steadying me. "You okay?" Mike repeated over and over, his eyes dark with concern.

I could manage only a dumb nod.

"Maybe we should go back a bit," Mike allowed. We again joined hands, turned and waded toward shore, encountering little resistance from the Mongolian horde. In less than a minute most had retreated to the safety and relative warmth of the sand.

We settled in water up to my waist and turned to face each other. Hands intertwined, we jumped up and down in the waves like idiots in a Monte Python movie. I relaxed a bit. Moving around definitely made me warmer.

"Oof." Something hit me, sending a sharp pain into my side. I released Mike's hand and turned, wobbled slightly and then righted myself. A red surfboard bobbed beside me. The top sported a black mountain logo. My heart skipped a beat, then another. Sereno Cellars used a black mountain against a red background on their wine labels.

"What the hell?" Mike asked, staring at the board. I grabbed it, uncertain of what to do next.

I squinted toward the beach. Even with limited sight, I could see that a restless, unsettled feeling hovered over the beach. Onlookers huddled in small groups. Lifeguards leapt from their stations. Whistles shrilled as they bolted toward the water.

"Shark!" The lifeguards shouted, and then again. And again. "Everyone out. Now!" Sirens erupted from the patrol boats stationed beyond the breakers.

Mike pulled me toward shore. Other people in the water ran clumsily toward the sand, in some cases colliding with gawkers moving in for a better look.

"Blood!" Someone yelled. Sure enough, foam on waves near the shore took on a pinkish tinge. A great commotion began next to us, someone in a wetsuit and hood struggling toward the beach half-dragging, half-carrying another person identically clad. People ran out to help and only got in the way.

I screamed and couldn't stop. Time blurred. We splashed and fought our way the short distance to the sand at the foot of the pier, somehow eluding sheriff's deputies cordoning off the area.